



LINES AND COLOURS

Discovering Indian Art

ELLA DATTA



Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

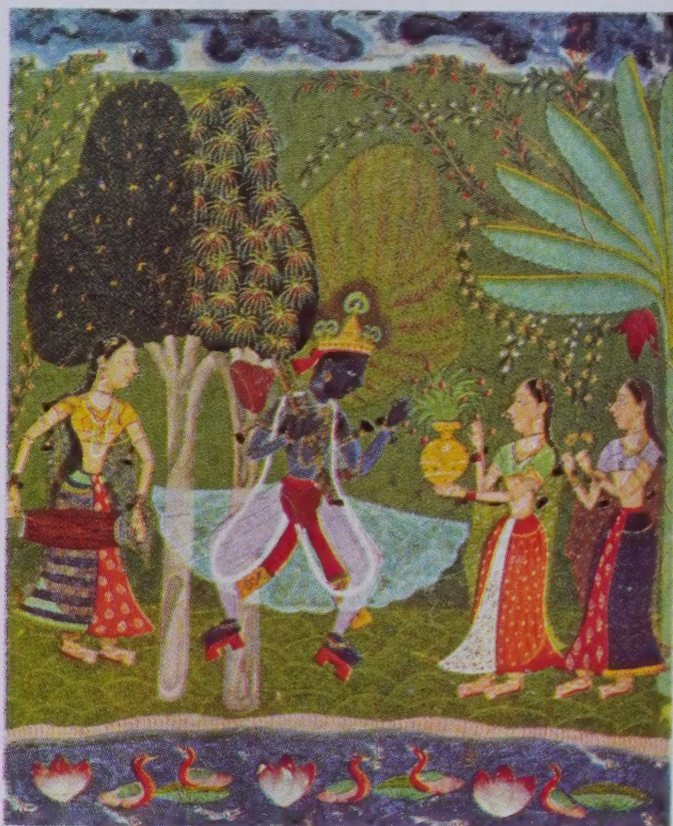
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ELLA DATTA



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THE DANCING GIRL OF MOHENJODARO

My friend Munia will be thirteen on her next birthday in January. She has been taking painting lessons for the last couple of years. In the beginning, it was a chore for her, just doing something her parents wanted her to do.

But suddenly she has begun to feel the magic of lines, colours, forms. She is full of questions about India. When did it begin? Who were the artists? For whom were these works of art made?

To satisfy her curiosity, I thought we would go on a trip through 4500 years or more of Indian art. We would visit museums and galleries wherever possible or look through pages of books. Our search would not only allow us to enjoy the beauties but also trace the lines of continuity and change running through thousands of years.

At the beginning, we decide to visit the Harappa Gallery at the National Museum in New Delhi. The first object that catches our eye is the figure of the famous Dancing Girl of Mohenjodaro. Munia remarks with delight and surprise, "How tiny she is!" and indeed her observation is very true. She looks much bigger in her photographs.

"Do you know how this great little lady was found?" I ask Munia. During the systematic excavation of the southern sector of the Mohenjo Daro site, a broken down house was found on the 'ninth lane.' The house although ruined had well-paved floors. Near the fire-place the bronze statuette was found lying on the floor.

The figurine changed the way one looked at Indian art of antiquity. Historian A L Basham says that the "pert liveliness" of the minute figure is quite unlike anything found in any of the ancient civilisations. The Indus Valley artists and craftspersons were masters of the miniature. The bronze statuette is barely four inches high. And yet it speaks volumes of a metal caster's superb skills.

The title "Dancing Girl" is a surmise. Possibly it was given because of the sense of movement the figurine conveys. Scholars all over have commented on the vivacity of the stance. She is without any clothes which is rare in Indian art. Her left leg is slightly bent and her left arm rests lightly on her thigh. Her weight is placed on her right leg and her right arm is bent and resting on her hips in an insouciant gesture.

She is wearing lots of bangles and a necklace. Her hair is elaborately coiled. Munia is quick to notice that the terracotta Mother Goddess figures are also heavily ornamented and elaborately coiffed. I tell her that this is a characteristic that she will encounter right through Indian art.



Dancing Girl of Mohenjodaro. A unique sculpture of its time .
(Courtesy: National Museum)

Two other statuettes have held the attention of art historians. One is the bust of the bearded man made of a soft stone steatite. This little head, assumed to be of a priest-king and found in Mohenjodaro, is kept in Karachi National Museum. The other seen in our National Museum is a little sandstone torso discovered in Harappa. The styles of the two sculptures differ widely but they are both remarkable in their own way.

There is a definite attempt at portraiture, that is creating a likeness of a particular person, in the head of the bearded man. His full lips, straight nose, half-closed eyes are worth noting. The treatment of the eyes is worth remembering. We will see similar ways of sculpting or painting eyes throughout Indian art. The bearded man should be observed for the use of lines to create textures like hair, beard, designs on garment. Whorling lines are also used to define ears.

The red sandstone torso, on the other hand, is filled with the magic of naturalism, that is, it's made to look as close to the natural form as possible. The gentle curves of the muscles are so lovingly modelled that it tempts the viewer to touch it and hold it in one's hands.

Who were these people who carved and cast such beautiful sculptures, Munia asks? Nobody knows for certain, I answer.

It is a jigsaw puzzle with large chunks missing, so that the final picture is not quite clear. Some facts are known however. About 4500 years ago, give or take a few centuries, there lived on the banks of the Indus, a urban community who lived in impressive, well-planned cities.

Remains of their towns and settlements were first discovered at Harappa and then Mohenjodaro in what is now in Pakistan. The culture was named after the first excavations at Harappa. Subsequently, similar settlements were found all over extensive areas of northern and western India like Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and elsewhere.

We also know that the people lived by agriculture and trade within and outside the country. There exist ample evidences of their craftsmanship. Take, for example, the long chains of large, beautifully polished carnelians, intricate ornaments like chains and bangles.

Other than these material samples, much of the society, its culture, and religion are in the realm of speculation. No one can say for certain what was their attire, what mode of worship or other such lifestyle details.

One relic of this ancient civilisation that has added to the mystery surrounding this proto-historic culture is the existence of seals. Made of steatite, the seals are very small and are mostly square or rectangular in shape. On these



Yogi Seal. This famous seal from Mohenjodaro showing a seated figure in a yogic posture surrounded by animals could have been a model for later art traditions, particularly Buddhist sculpture. (Courtesy: National Museum)

tiny surfaces are carved in low relief, in exquisite detail, animals, humans and composite creatures of mythology – half human or a blend of various animals like a horned tiger. Of the animals, the most common are bulls, tigers, rhinoceruses and elephants. There are also some vivid depictions of plants.

The seals are particularly puzzling because of the writing that accompanies the images. Considered to be a pictographic script, where the letters are symbols or pictures of objects, several hundreds of signs have been catalogued so far. In spite of many scholars working in the area of decoding the script, no definitive breakthroughs have come so far.

Munia wants to know what functions the seals had. No one can be quite sure. Scholars have suggested that they could have been used for trade or for personal or for family identifications. Experts also feel that some of the seals

have religious purpose. They are also of the opinion that once the script has been deciphered, we will get to know more about the people.

While the Harappan culture has revealed excellence in sculpture and crafts, there are very few remains of paintings. Patterns on pottery characterised as black-on-red ware are rare exceptions. I show Munia the beautiful forms of pots finished with a reddish glaze which have been decorated with a variety of geometric designs done in black.

The artists of the Indus Valley had a great feel for natural forms and could depict them with marvellous skill. Consider the power and energy of the bulls whether they are modelled as separate figures or engraved on seals, or the ferocity of the tigers on the seals. They could model or carve with enormous sensitivity. What is even more fascinating is the first appearance of yogic postures, or the association of humans with trees. These are motifs which have evolved through centuries enriching the language of Indian art.

HARAPPAN TOYS

Like all Indians, it appears that the Indus Valley people were very fond of children. The large variety of terracotta toys gives ample testimony of this concern and affection. One can see delightful, little animals — playful monkeys, birds, or a bull whose head moves funnily. Then there are toy-carts and animals on wheels that can be pulled. There are also little whistles. This type of a folk-toy can still be seen in village markets and fairs.



Seated Monkey. Toys were found in plenty in the Harappan Culture.

LION CAPITAL OF SARNATH

Munia is very interested in the visual environment around us. She wants to know the origins of our national emblem, the lion capital.



Lion Capital of Sarnath: celebrated emblem of independent India.

The lion capital is on top of an Asokan pillar at Sarnath, in the outskirts of Varanasi where Buddha had preached his first sermon. The capital, made of highly-polished sandstone is more than two metres in height. The capital comprises four lions placed back to back on a round slab or what is called an abacus resting atop an inverted bell-like form carved like a lotus. Historians date this capital to sometime around 250 B.C. On the side of the abacus are carved four animals—lion, elephant, bull and horse moving in a clockwise fashion. The animals are interspersed with four wheels or chakras which represent the Buddhist concept of the wheel of law.

These lions should be watched carefully, I tell Munia. Compared to the naturalism in the treatment of animals in the Harappan culture, here we observe a stylisation in the depiction of the sacred lions. Certain characteristics of the fierce animal are captured artistically to become a model. One can see the stylisation in the gaping, roaring mouths, in the wavy hair of the mane, in the curling whiskers.

Surprisingly, compared to the majesty of the lion, the animals on the abacus are done with great naturalistic energy. Then again the inverted bull is a stylised carving. Munia notices these contrasts. She then asks why this particular capital was chosen as the national emblem? Perhaps, I tell her, because the pillar carries Asoka's message of unity to the Buddhist monks. And this advice to keep together must have been considered apt for a newly-formed nation.

Asoka was a mighty king who reigned during the 3rd century B.C. He was the grandson of emperor Chandragupta, founder of the Maurya dynasty. When Asoka became king he ruled a vast territory from Afghanistan in the north-west to south India.

In every man's life there comes a defining moment when different paths open up inviting an individual to make a choice. It can transform a person from mindless acts to saintliness. From rude beginnings, Valmiki became a sublime epic poet.

Similarly, Asoka's turning point came in the eighth year of his reign after the dreadful battle of Kalinga where thousands lost their lives and were taken in bondage. Witnessing the senseless bloodshed, Asoka experienced a change of heart. He adopted as his life's mission the Buddhist path of righteous living and took it upon himself to spread Buddha's teachings of peace and non-violence far and wide in his kingdom and outside it.

He inscribed edicts about Buddha's lessons on the right path on rock faces and pillars. In the north-west the edicts were engraved on rock in Greek and Aramaic, while in the rest of the country, they were written in the Brahmi script.

The importance of Asokan pillars, I tell Munia, is immense. These are the first instances we have so far of written history in India, a country where written text from ancient times are relatively scarce. Unless the Harappan seals are deciphered, we cannot make any claims for them.

From the point of view of art, the Asokan pillars are even more important. These are the earliest examples of large-scale artistic creations for which Indian artists gained a lot of fame. We see in the animal figures on the capitals topping the pillars, attempts to combine both stylisation and naturalism. An attempt that can be traced right through the history of Indian art.

We also see a deliberate choice of decorative motifs to ornament the capitals. The Indian artists and crafts persons had no hesitation in borrowing even from alive resource pools if it fitted the total character of the work. On the capitals of the Asokan pillars we notice motifs such as rosettes, palmettes and honeysuckles.

There are some twenty Asokan pillars discovered so far. There are two categories of such pillars. One comprises edicts written on already existing pillars. The other set includes pillars ordered specially by Emperor Asoka. According to the noted art historian Vidya Dehejia, "These finely polished pillars were carved of tan-coloured sandstone from a single quarry at Chunar near the Mauryan capital of Pataliputra," now Patna the capital of Bihar. The pillar shafts were made of a single piece of stone measuring some nine metres or thirty feet in height. They had a smooth polished surface and tapered gradually towards the top.

The pillars were adorned on the top by a capital carved out of single pieces of stone. The capital consisted of an inverted bell-shaped form finely carved



Bull Capital from Rampurva. A fine example of Mauryan art
(Courtesy: Rashtrapati Bhavan)

like a lotus on which rested a thick disc called an abacus over which perched a magnificent animal or a group of animals like the Sarnath lions. Apart from this, there are also single animals crowning the capital like the famous Ramapurva bull of which I show her pictures.

Munia marvels at the artistry, skill and technology of these people who existed more than 2000 years ago. How did they manage to carve such huge figures and achieve such marvellous polish with such simple tools, she asks?

Indian artistry has always been a cause for wonder, I tell her. I also show her pictures of another group of free-standing sculptures which were once thought to be Mauryan. The Didarganj chauri-bearer is the most famous among these sculptures.

Recent research, however dated this beautiful statue and a couple of beautifully carved male torsos as more than 400 years after the Mauryan period. The reason for ascribing the Mauryan tag on them was because of the high polish. Later it was thought that the polish was a special technical skill acquired by the craftsmen near Patna.

The Didarganj chauri-bearer, named so because it was excavated from Diddarganj near Patna is a beautiful female figure standing 5ft 4inches high. The most remarkable feature of sculpture apart from the high polish is the serene expression on her face. She stands so calm and self-possessed that it creates a powerful impact.

The stone carving shows that the lower portion of her body is draped with some fine material. The folds are carved delicately. She is heavily ornamented wearing bangles, necklace, anklets and earrings, heavy pieces round her head and waist. She has an elaborate hairdo and her upper torso is undraped. In a way, her attire becomes a model for carvings of women through the ancient period.

The beautiful Didarganj chauri-bearer is a proud symbol of Indian artistic genius. It was sent abroad for a Festival of India exhibition attracting adulation



Chauri bearer from Didarganj. Famous for its high polish, this is a priceless art treasure from India. (Courtesy: Patna Museum)

from viewers. But unfortunately during transportation over great distance, the lovely face of the Didarganj lady got a tiny scratch. Ever since then the Government of India has created a special category of art objects in museums which can never travel anywhere. The Diddarganj chauri-bearer is one such precious sculpture, to see which one must go to the Patna Museum or gaze at her beauty in the pages of books.

In Indian art, I explain to Munia, there is always a big debate about origins. The Asokan pillars are just one instance of it. Most art historians refer to it but Partha Mitter sums it up in his book on Indian art. Some historians say that the Persian influence is visible in these massive pillars and their decoration. It was the historian Vincent Smith who asserted that Indian art originated from Perso-Hellenic sources. He said that Iranian craftsmen after the decline of the Achaemenid Empire, came to Asoka's glittering court and set off a trend. Smith's reasons for arriving at this conclusion were the high polish of Asokan pillars, the lotus bell capital and the decorative motifs like rosettes and palmettes, honeysuckles and acanthus, as well as the stylised lions on the capital of the Sarnath pillar.

Historian John Irwin and others challenged Smith's colonial attitude. Irwin said that Asoka may have been inspired by the Achaemenid emperors like Darius to make political use of the pillars but not all Asokan pillars belong to his reign. There were many from an existing pillar cult which Asoka took over to proclaim his imperial message.

Besides, the Asokan pillars were smoothly rounded while the Persian columns were fluted. The Asokan pillars rose from the ground and stood on their own and were not a part of any architecture.

The stylised lion may have been Persian in influence, but the bulls, elephants, geese were naturalistic and very Indian in their treatment. As for the decorative motifs, they were inspired by a common West Asian source which influenced both Greece and India.

THE GREAT DEPARTURE

There were large gaps in our ancient history. Indians seemed to have forgotten chunks of their past. It was only in the 19th century that the curiosity of the British officers led to wonderful exciting discoveries. I tell Munia about the Great Stupa at Sanci explored by Sir Alexander Cunningham in 1851.

Descriptions given by British officials make Sanci out to be one of the most pleasing archaeological sites. Located on a low hill in Central India, this great hemispherical construction housed relics of Buddha. There were smaller stupas which housed the relics of his disciples. The Great Stupa, it is estimated was built around 250 B.C. in Asoka's time. It was then enlarged and embellished in the 1st century B.C.

To describe to Munia the Great Stupa at Sanci, I show her a picture of the beautifully carved east gate. The stone gateway consists of two square stone pillars joined by three horizontal slightly carved architraves. On the architraves are carved stories of Buddha's life. Munia and I agree that storytelling is one of the best and most inviting ways of getting to know a subject.

In ancient times, when there were no newspapers, magazines or possibly story books, the Buddhist monasteries found an effective way to narrate Buddha's life and teachings. In stupa architecture, the artists found many ways to narrate episodes of Buddha's life. They also recounted Jataka stories which described events in the many incarnations of Buddha.

Were such storytelling found only in the Buddhist stupas, Munia asks. No, narratives became a part of Indian cultural traditions. We see stories in frescoes painted in caves, in murals on palace or fortress walls, in miniatures, carved on temple walls, performed in dance recitals, sung in music compositions, present everywhere in fact. But as far as we know, the first narrations of Buddha's life appeared carved on stone in the Central Indian Stupas of which Sanci is the most prominent.

I show Munia a picture of one of the famous sculptured reliefs on stone—the Great Departure, worked out on the east gate of the Sanci Stupa. It recounts the moment Siddhartha leaves his palace and family to go into the forest to seek enlightenment.



The Great Departure on the east gate at Sanci Stupa.
Here Buddha is not represented as a human figure.

The sculptors have carved out of sandstone measuring some eight feet, a lively scene teeming with palace balconies on the left, trees, gods and people who assisted Siddhartha to abandon domesticity, a horse on which Siddhartha rode away. The horse is shown repeatedly to indicate progress of Siddhartha. On the extreme right, the horse is shown returning. His groom Chandaka is kneeling down to bid farewell to his master.

One of the great enigmas of the relief sculptures of this time is that no representation of the Buddha is seen. In the panels under discussion, the horse is shown riderless. Only the umbrella held aloft the horse indicates royal personage of the rider. At the end of the journey there are footprints of the Buddha, which remain one of the most well-known symbols of the Enlightened One. Munia recalls seeing one pair at the Indian Museum at Kolkata.

There are other beautiful sculptures at Sanci to enthrall the viewer. On a bracket on the east gateway is the figure of a beautiful woman precariously poised holding onto a mango tree, heavy with fruit and one hand reaching up to grasp a branch. The rhythmic lines of a glorious vision of man living in harmony with nature is seen repeatedly. Other memorable sculptural friezes or

panels are the Great Monkey Jataka and the scene of Enlightenment on the west gateway, a Vessantara Jataka story on the north gateway and the vivacious treatment of walking on water on the east pillar.

The style of visual storytelling continued to be developed with greater flair and confidence at Bharhut in Central India and Amaravati in the Andhra region of the Satavahana kingdom.

One of the most attractive features of these stories carved on stone is the expression of vibrant joy in depiction of everyday life. There are processions with music and dance, people witnessing the celebration, flowering or fruit-laden trees, vividly carved animals caught in action, men and women engaged in everyday work like carrying sheaves of grain. It is a magnificent record of the life of the times and a wonderful mingling of the sacred with the ordinary. They had set a model for artists of future generations for centuries to come.

The procession became a favourite decoration of temple walls.

The post-Asoka sculptors who adorned the Stupas some 150 years after Asoka's death were so confident of the style of working that they devised many ways of telling a story. There was the continuous narrative beginning at one end and climaxing at another like the Great Departure.

Then there would be a central focus like Buddha's Enlightenment on the west gate of the Great Stupa, Sanci. On either side of the central carving there would be two different kinds of scenes. On one side, the Maras who tried to deflect Siddhartha from his meditation with temptations and fearsome acts, fleeing in disarray when Siddhartha attains Enlightenment and becomes the



Woman claspimg a mango tree. A bracket figure on east gate at Sanci Stupa. The association of women with trees is a continuing tradition in Indian art.



A Jataka story on the west gateway at Sanci Stupa. The story moves vertically.

Buddha. On the other side Gods celebrate the great moment. Stories were also told on square and circular panels. Sometimes they moved vertically, beginning at the top and ending at the bottom. And to think Indian artists devised all these thousands of years before comic strips became popular.

STUPAS

Early stupas, which preserved the Buddha's relics were the first monuments to symbolize the power and magnificence of the faith. Originally the focus of a popular cult of the dead, this stupa celebrated the Buddha's parinirvana and also symbolizes his eternal 'body'.

The stupa began as an earthen burial mound, which was revered by the local population. The cult of stupas was adopted by the Buddhists. They were large, hemispherical domes with small central chambers in which the relics of the Buddha were placed in a casket, often beautifully carved in crystal. The stupa was crowned by an umbrella of wood or stone and was surrounded by a wooden fence enclosing a path for circumambulation (pradakshina) which was the chief form of reverence paid to the relics.

While some art historians argue that the stupa, like the later Hindu temple, was conceived as a microcosm of the universe, others assert that cosmic symbolism did not have any great role to play.

Considering the expense and number of artists/artisans involved at Sanci, it is surprising to know that significant funding came from the local populace. Men and women, family groups, village associations gave money for paving slabs, railing units, gateway narratives, and sculptures. A number of people, from different backgrounds helped in the construction of the stupas. They included Mahayana monks, ivory workers of Vidisa, a Satavahana queen, merchants. The donors were assured that their gifts would earn spiritual merit. Buddhist monasteries or viharas were located on major trade-routes in the country, enabling monks or bhikkus to be in contact with the mercantile community and thus get funds.

GANDHARA BODHISATTVA

Having absorbed the information of symbolic representation of the Buddha in the stupa sculptures, Munia now asks an intriguing question. She wants to know when the first Buddha images, now so familiar to Indians, appeared.

It is a long story, I tell her, and it belongs to one of the most creative periods of Indian art. During the 1st century A.D. the Kushanas, or the nomadic Yueh-Chi tribe from China, established their rule in northern India. The most important emperor of this dynasty, Kanishka, adopted Buddhism. After Asoka's reign, the spread of the religion now received another spurt.

It was during Kanishka's reign that the representations of Buddha's human form came to be first seen. But they were a little bit different from the male figures in the stupa sculptures. For one thing, the figures were fully draped in flowering garments. There was a Greek touch in the fine drapes of the figure, the athletic built, the moustache. The art was called Gandhara, following the substantial discovery of stone sculptures and other remains in the Gandhara region between Indus and Kabul. The influence of Grecian and Roman classicism was evident in certain ideals of proportion and ornamentation.

One of the most beautiful sculptures of this school is that of Prince Siddhartha as Bodhisattva or Buddha in the making. It is a standing, full-length, grey schist stone statue of a handsome young man. The Bodhisattva, now in a Paris museum, wears elaborately draped garments, lots of ornaments round his neck, arms and fingers, a turban-like headgear and sandals on his feet. His face is dashing mustachioed and there is a halo behind his head.

Besides the Buddha and Bodhisattva figures, there were numerous other finds like narrative friezes of Buddha's life and Corinthian capitals which is a distinct Greek order or style. There were decorative features like swags, cupids, cornucopias and mythical figures like Atlas and a frieze of marine deities.

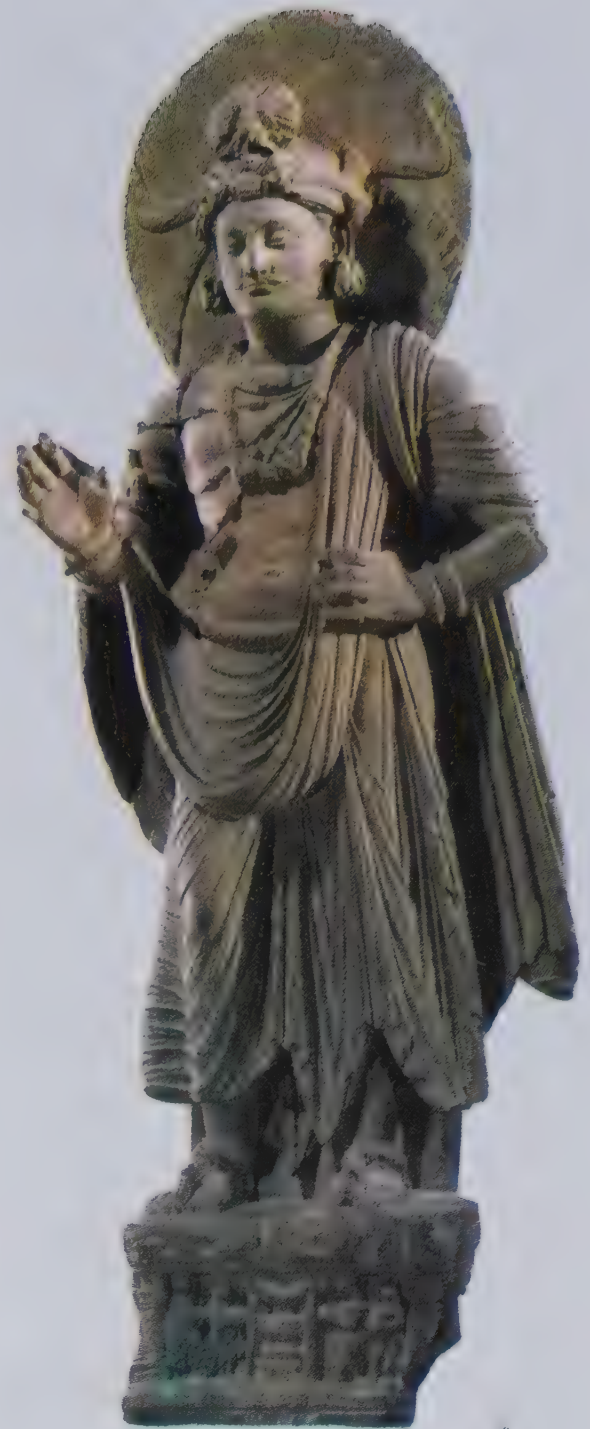
Ever since the British officers and archaeologists excavated these northern

sites and unearthed indescribable historical and art treasures in the form of coins, architecture, sculptures and objects of decorative art, they were immensely excited. Their opinion of Indian art was revalued because of the Classical character of its style. And they carried back sacks full of material to their own country. For instance, one Dr. Gottlieb Leitner, educationist and explorer, carried crates of statuary from Swat Valley to London in 1868.

The British archaeologists, explorers and art historians were engaged in a lively debate as to whether the influence was Greek or Roman. They also speculated on whether Greek artists were responsible for the works. Munia says perceptively that this seems to be a familiar pattern. The Western experts are always ready to credit outside influences for the excellence of Indian art. But, Munia asks, how did the Greek influence come to the local artists? Was Alexander's invasion responsible for the Greek influx?

Not quite, I say. Alexander's invasion in 326 B.C. left hardly any trace of his conquest in North India. From Achaemenid times, there were small colonies of Asiatic Greeks in Bactria in northern Afghanistan. These settlements were bolstered further by Alexander and later towards the end of the 4th century B.C. by his general Seleucus Nicator.

By the middle of 3rd century B.C. Diodotus, governor of Bactria, declared his independence from the Seleucid empire. Subsequently, a number of Greeks wrested the Bactrian throne from each other. But each of them cast an eye on India and conquered territories. The Greek territories in India were divided into small kingdoms. Descendants of one Eucratides ruled Kabul Valley and Taxila while descendants of Euthydemus ruled over Punjab. There was one Greek king Menander or Milinda who became a Buddhist.

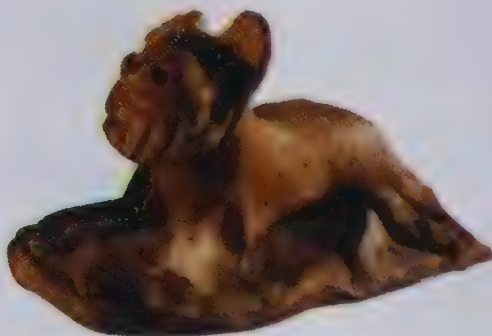


Prince Siddhartha as Bodhisattva from Gandhara. The handsome moustachioed figure is a new development in Indian art.

The Greek kingdoms of Bactria did not last long. There were waves of invasions. First came the Saka-Parthians. They were displaced by the Kushanas. But whoever the invaders were, they patronised works of art. These were rich kingdoms situated on important trade routes. Plates and other objects of gold and silver, ornate, heavy jewellery, carved ivory objects, steatite bowls and dishes, not to mention larger stone sculptures were found in north-west India, now Pakistan and in Afghanistan.

It is surmised that such a buried hoard discovered at Sirkap, near Taxila could have been hidden by the Saka-Parthians to protect it from the onrushing Kushanas. There were a large body of exquisite metal ware in this buried cache. There were silver goblets and other drinking vessels as well as intricate jewellery of the kind seen on statues. Some of the metal ware can be seen at the Taxila Museum but most are displayed in museums abroad.

Comprising a blend of Greco-Roman, Iranian and Indian elements, Gandhara art did not flourish for very long. But more or less, during the same period another school of art was burgeoning in Mathura, the winter capital of the Kushanas.



THE MATHURA BUDDHA

Munia had been to Mathura on a school trip. She knows this old city on the River Yamuna as a place famed for the exploits of Lord Krishna and for the special milk sweet, pedha. Unfortunately, she was not able to visit the Mathura Museum as it was closed.

If she had, she would know that Mathura was a famous Buddhist and Jain site as well. The Mathura Buddhas represent one of the finest developments in Indian art.

There is heated debate between some historians as to where the Buddha icon first appeared – Gandhara or Mathura. But a substantial section of experts think that the images emerged in the two different art centres almost simultaneously. However, the Mathura Buddhas were quite different from the Gandhara ones.

Of course, artists in both places employed the signs that distinguished the Buddha. These are the special iconographical characteristics by which a deity is known. In the case of the Buddha, there is the ushnisa, which is thought to be the wisdom bump on top of his head. Coils of hair were arranged over it. There was the urna, supposed to be a curl of hair on the forehead. This is portrayed like a dot almost like the all-seeing third eye of the gods. And finally, there were the elongated ears of the Buddha. There were many other signs as well.

While these common traits can be noticed in both the Gandhara and the Mathura styles of sculpture, the differences, rather the distinctiveness of each are even more remarkable. Munia asks me to point out the differences.

First, I tell her to observe the figures. The Gandhara Buddhas, built on the model of Greek Apollos, are slim and athletic. The Mathura figures, on the other hand, are broad-shouldered and powerfully built. In the Gandhara style, the hair is wavy and the garment covers both shoulders. In the Mathura figures, the hair fits like a cap and the topknot is coiled like a snail. The drapery falls over the left shoulder leaving the right shoulder bare.



Seated Buddha from Mathura. It is worth noting the powerful physique and the posture like the seated yogi of Mohenjodaro.

I tell Munia that had she seen the Seated Buddha at the Mathura Museum and compared it with the pictures of Gandhara Buddhas, she would have been able to spot the differences herself. Even now a comparison of the pictures would give a good idea.

The Seated Buddha at the Mathura Museum belongs to the 2nd Century AD. He has a serene, smiling face and eyes that look directly at the viewer. This is a contrast to the Gandhara Buddhas where the eyes are more inward-looking.

The transparent robes carved with deeply etched circular lines point to a strong physique. He is sitting in a yogic position like the figure in the Harappan seal. The soles of Buddha's feet are turned upwards in what is known as Padmasana or lotus position and they are marked with Buddha's symbols. His left hand is resting on his knee while his right hand is raised with the palm outwards in the abhaya mudra (a gesture of reassurance and blessing). This position was a model for almost all the seated figures.

The halo behind Buddha's head, signalling his divinity, is marked with a scalloped design on the edge. In the background, there is the foliage of pipal tree, also a symbol of Buddha as he attained enlightenment. The lively naturalism with which the leaves are treated is wonderful to watch. Indian artists through the ages have been particularly skillful in portraying natural life.

The Buddha has two attendant figures on either side, a common feature in the representation of important personages. There are also two celestial beings carved on top of the halo. Besides the Seated Buddha, there are also several larger-than-life-sized standing Buddhas. These statues were donated by Bhikkus and Bhikkunis (Buddhist monks and nuns). There is the well-known huge standing Buddha from Mathura of the 1st Century AD which Bhikku Bala had installed at Sarnath.

The other major difference between Gandhara and Māthura sculptures, I tell Munia, is in the material. The Gandhara sculptures were from a grey schist stone. The Mathura sculptures, in contrast, were from red sandstone spotted and veined with yellow.

MATHURA

Situated on the River Yamuna, between Delhi and Agra, Mathura is a thriving city today. But it is also an ancient urban centre with more than 2000 years of history.

Mathura was mentioned by Ptolemy. It was the winter capital of Kushans. Archaeological excavations show that it was important as Buddhist and Jain sites. It is also a major centre of Vaishnava worship as it is associated with Krishna's birth and kingship.

The importance of Mathura from ancient times can be understood from its geographical position. It was located on the crossroads of major trade routes from Konkan coast in the south-west to lower Doab and Pataliputra (now Patna) on one side and to Gandhara on another.

In Indian art history, Mathura plays an incredibly important role. A continuous sculptural tradition flourished here for several centuries. Beginning with the terracotta figurines of 200-100 BC, the sculptures began to be made of stone and the styles continued to blossom till the Gupta period.

The most outstanding development of the period was the emergence of icons of Hindu deities. Certain attributes were used to describe each deity by which he or she could be recognised. For instance, Durga would always be seen riding a lion and slaying a buffalo-demon irrespective of how many arms she had. Saraswati would always be represented playing veena.

KANISHKA

What is the most awesome figure in Indian sculpture, I ask Munia? Unhesitatingly she replies, the headless figure of King Kanishka. The statue of the king seen in the pages of history books carries such an air of mystery and authority, she says. It is so different from anything else in Indian art.

How instinctively right Munia is, I think. The headless figure of Kanishka, kept in the Mathura Museum, is stiff, angular and impressively exuding a sense of power. The figure clothed in a heavy cloak and padded boots stands assertively with its feet apart. Similar boots are still found in the Gilgit region. Deep lines engraved on the cloak suggest folds of the fabric.

His strong hands grip a sword and a mace. The statue was identified because of an inscription on the bottom of the mantle declaring, "The Great King of Kings, His Majesty Kanishka." The heavy garments speak of his origins in the Central Asian homelands. In the heat of Mathura, the attire was perhaps used for ceremonial purposes.

Kanishka was the greatest king of the Kushan dynasty. He became a



Headless figure of Kanishka, Mathura. This powerful statue is among the first of the portrait sculptures.

follower of Buddha and was a great patron of the arts. We have read earlier how representation of Buddha's human form began in his reign and how two distinct schools of sculpture flourished at the time.

The Kushan kings commissioned a number of portrait sculptures, a genre of sculpture that was not common till then in India. Some art historians attribute the stiffness of the execution to the fact that Indian artists were not comfortable with replicating the regal form without the guidance of systems and signs specified by tradition. The kind of poetry and idealism with which they imbued the Buddha figures, the kind of ornamentations that they normally used are missing here. Nevertheless, the sculptors have invested the figure with a feeling of dominance.

Apart from Kanishka, there are portrait statues of his predecessor, Wima Kadphises and others as well. The seated statue of Wima Kadphises is also headless. However, one gets an idea of the complete portraits when one looks at the numerous coins issued by the Kushans. Kanishka appears with a massive bearded head wearing a peaked cap.

The Kushan coins give an idea of the dynasty's liberal attitudes to religion. Kanishka adopted Buddhism but he issued coins not only depicting Buddha, but also Shiva and gods of Iran and Greece. In the north-west part of the kingdom, comprising Gandhara region, travelling craftsmen from the Roman East were employed by the Kushan kings so that Roman influence mingled with the Greek in the Gandhara style of sculpture.

Just before the start of the Christian era, a powerful tribe named Yueh-Chi from Kansu province in north-west China swept down into Bactria and drove out the Sakas. They called themselves Kushans in India and established their rule in the country in the first fifty years of the Christian era.

The founder of the Kushan dynasty was Kujula Kadphises. He not only conquered Gandhara and the Punjab but also had established political relations and trade with the Roman Empire of Augustus.

It was Kanishka, however, who extended the Kushan rule from Central Asia to Bengal. Kanishka is considered by many as second only to Asoka for spreading Buddhism. He was said to be instrumental in disseminating Buddhism in areas adjacent to his kingdom and as far as China. He was credited with having summoned the Fourth Buddhist Council in Kashmir.

Kanishka had built one of the largest stupas in ancient Kanishkapura, his capital near modern Peshawar. This stupa was famous and was described by the Chinese traveller Xuan Zang, who visited India in the 7th Century. The ruins of the stupa and the surrounding areas came to be called Shahji-ki-Dheri.

BEGRAM HOARD

Begram, which was the ancient city, Kapisa, was a major Kushan site. It was located some 25 miles outside Kabul. A 19th Century archaeologist, Charles Masson, who spent ten dangerous years moving about among the fierce Afghan tribes, heard rumours about finds in Begram. His instincts led him to discover a rich treasury of coins.

Later excavations revealed a Kushana summer palace with a rich hoard of burial treasures. The hoard shows that the Kushana kings collected beautiful art objects. Situated as they were at the crossroads of the rich Central Asian silk route, they collected metalware, Roman painted glass, Chinese laquerware and Indian ivory carvings.

The treasures, as it is surmised were hurriedly buried for safekeeping during the Sassanian invasion. Our interest in the treasures lies in the cache of Indian ivory carvings. It is clear that these were traded far and wide. An elegantly carved mirror handle was found in Pompeii, a city buried in lava by an eruption of the Mount Vesuvius.

The ivory carvers were much honoured and their guild is mentioned in inscriptions. One can understand why, when one looks at the pictures of Begram ivories. Many of these are kept at the Musee Guimet in Paris.

Many of the ivory carvings are in the form of plaques which were used for covering boxes or furniture. While certain Hellenic or Greek motifs are used as border ornamentations, the figures are clearly inspired by Indian notions of beauty.

The figures are formed by deeply engraved outlines on the surface of the ivory. The lines themselves are flowing and graceful. The figures of women depicted are either standing or seated at toilet. They are as usual, beautifully ornamented and some indicate conventions in Indian art which were to become well-established. There is the woman who holds a bird perched on her fingers.

VISHNU FROM MATHURA

Why is the Gupta period called the Golden Age of Indian art, Munia asks. To show her why this was a high period of Indian artistic achievement, I take her for a trip to the National Museum, Delhi.

I take her to see the famous Vishnu statue from Mathura made of red sandstone around mid 1st century A.D. The sculpture has all the characteristic



Vishnu from Mathura, Gupta period: Poetic sensitivity.
(Courtesy: National Museum)

beauty of the Gupta style of art. Although the image is without arms and legs, and the surface is slightly damaged, the face is filled with a sublime contemplative serenity.

The torso is modelled with such poetic sensitivity that the cold stone is transformed into warm flesh. The sculptor's artistry has matured and the lines are no longer stiff but have acquired a lyrical grace.

Munia is observant. She points out how beautifully the ornaments and drapery contrast with the plainness of the torso and the godliness of the face. Vishnu wears two necklaces, armlets, girdle and an elaborate headgear.

The Gupta gallery at the National Museum is a feast for the eyes. The exquisite sculptures in the round and the panels repeatedly stress the gracefulness with which the sculptors carved the images. This is as true of gods and goddesses, Buddhas and characters from epics and puranas as of decorative friezes. There is one panel which shows buffaloes and deer rushing through the foliage. Even though a little stylised in its rendering, nonetheless the frieze captures the wild energy of the animals and the lush exuberance of the vegetation.

There is also a delightful panel which I am happy to show Munia. It catches the naughty pranks of Krishna with such vivacity. There is young Krishna lying on his side and kicking up one leg effortlessly thus upsetting a cart loaded with milk or water pots. On the right of the panel, a young girl, her face damaged, has her hands covering her mouth in a gesture of either amusement or shock. Indian artists have always shown a genius for taking moments from everyday scenes and transforming them into timeless images.

Other than the Gupta Gallery at the National Museum, Delhi, beautiful examples of Gupta art are scattered all over the country in other museums as well as at site. Take, for example, the Seated Buddha in red sandstone at Sarnath Museum. Or Vishnu's Varaha avatar of 5th century in sandstone at Sagar University Museum. The spiritual beauty of the one and the powerful presence of the other are incomparable in Indian art. Art historians say that the period produced some of the greatest sculptures anywhere in the world.

Munia wanted to know more about the Gupta period. She was curious about the patrons who nurtured such superb art.

The name of the founder of the dynasty was Chandragupta, not to be confused with Chandragupta Maurya. Chandragupta was crowned 'King of Kings' at Pataliputra in 320 A.D. The Guptas ruled uninterruptedly over the whole of northern India for a century and a half. The great kings of the dynasty,

besides Chandragupta, were Samudragupta, Chandragupta II, Kumaragupta and Skandagupta.

For the first time there was peace and political stability in northern India. The country was free from foreign incursions in several centuries and except for a brief period of Hun invasion, stability returned with the rule of Harshavardhana at Thanesar.

This was a syncretic period in Indian history in the sense different religions flourished at that time. Contemporary records by Chinese pilgrims Fa Hsien and Xuan Zang described how Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism flourished at that period. At the same time, the period saw a revival of Hinduism focusing on the spurt of a Vishnu cult with special emphasis on the life and exploits of Krishna.

Excerpts say that the Indian artistic genius found its fullest expression at that time. Whether it was music, literature, drama, plastic arts that is sculpture and so on, the Gupta period witnessed a flowering that was sophisticated and mature.

The epics Ramayana and Mahabharata became very popular. Sanskrit became the official court language. The Puranas received their full form which guided the iconography of the deities. That is they prescribed the signs by which the gods and goddesses can be depicted.

The Gupta period reached a peak in literature. Plays like Mrichhakatika (the toy cart) and Kalidasa's poetic plays are classics even today. So besides being a peaceful, prosperous period, it was a cultured, refined time when poetry and beauty were a part of one's life.



Varahavatar—boar incarnation of Vishnu—
from Madhya Pradesh,
Gupta period. Dramatic Stance. (Courtesy:
University Museum)

BODHISATTVA AT AJANTA

We have only followed famous sculptures so far. What about painting, Munia asks? I show her a picture of the great Bodhisattva on the left of the entrance to the sanctum at Cave I in Ajanta.

It is one of the masterpieces of world art. A male figure emanates a sense of compassion, tenderness and even a trace of melancholy at witnessing the sorrows



Bodhisattva at the entrance of Cave I at Ajanta.
It is a masterpiece of world art.

of the world. The figure embodies within its form the various ideals of beauty—eyes like lotus petals, a waist of leonine tautness.

One can only marvel at the lyrical grace of lines bounding the Bodhisattva figure and all the other attendant figures in the background. These large paintings on the walls of rock-cut caves are called murals. These paintings show interesting use of light and shade.

Like the narrative sculptures we encountered at the Buddhist stupas, the Ajanta cave murals also tell Jataka stories of the many births of the Buddha. The manner of telling the story does not follow a single line but large areas show foregrounded figures and various actions and events taking place in the background. There are scenes of considerable action, drama with a fascinating cast of characters. The ceilings are filled with decorative motifs from the vegetable and animal world. Many of the features have left a lasting impact on Indian art. Many contemporary artists quote from the language of Ajanta murals. For instance, Nandalal Bose of Kala Bhavan at Santiniketan, West Bengal, often used the half-closed, lotus petal eyes. There are several other instances and you have to look carefully to see the links that contemporary artists chose to establish with the traditional artists.

Although there are many references in the Buddhist texts about the existence of many murals, the paintings on the five cave-walls of Ajanta are all that survive.



A Jain mural at Sittannavasal.

The Ajanta murals, experts say, were done around the 5th century A.D. Wonderful murals of a century later were found in Bagh (Madhya Pradesh) and Badami (Karnataka). In south and western India, the tradition of decorating walls with paintings continued to flourish well into the medieval times. But from the early period the paintings found at the Jaina cave temple at Sittanavasal near Pudukottai, done in the 9th century A.D. are considered striking examples of early cave paintings.

Although historians describe the Ajanta murals as superb example of Gupta art, the cave temples of Ajanta were commissioned by the Vakataka kings, particularly Harisena. Carved from a horse-shoe shaped hillside rising from the Aghora river near north Deccan, these cave-temples had fallen into oblivion with the decline of Buddhism in India. It was discovered quite by chance in 1824 by one Lieutenant James Alexander of the British army when he went to the area on a shooting holiday.

The Buddhist monasteries were built at a very prosperous time for India. Trade routes were growing. The trade network extended all over northern India and through Gandhara to Central Asia. The trade included exports of both luxury goods and commodities of everyday need. The expensive exotic goods were hardwoods like ebony and teak, fragrant timber like sandalwood, as well as bamboo and ivory tusks, dyes like indigo and lac, aromatic spices and medicinal herbs and products, the famed Indian muslin and semi-precious stones like agate, jasper, carnelian and onyx. These products must have been traded for thousands of years because in Harappa culture diggings we see long ropes of beautiful carnelians and necklaces of semi-precious beads. In turn India would import wine, dates, glass, tin, copper, tortoiseshell and coral. Merchants and traders, who flourished from the 1st century of the Christian era onwards, catered both to the domestic and Mediterranean markets. They donated freely towards the construction and decoration of monasteries.

It has been observed by art historians like Vidya Dehejia and others that the Buddhist monasteries were located, in a very practical way, at strategic points on the bustling trade routes. Merchants thus, were easily persuaded to visit monasteries and donate generously. Even foreign merchants referred to as Yavanas, (although primarily the word described Greeks) were known to have contributed to rock-cut cave temples.

In the earlier centuries, the cave monasteries received many individual or collective donations. They came from rich merchants, bankers and guilds, as well as ordinary men and women like monks, nuns, housewives, fishermen and so on. From the 5th century A.D. onwards, royal patronage to the cave

temples became a major factor in the growth of Buddhist art. Interestingly, the donor monarchs were quite often Hindus but they had no hesitation in giving to Buddhist religious institutions.

AJANTA MURAL TECHNIQUE

It is surmised from the rich abundance of paintings on the walls and ceilings in the Ajanta caves that several workshops of painters had been employed. But the style and technique convey a sense of continuity.

The rough stone walls were first covered with two layers of mud plaster. These were covered with a lime wash. Painters waited for the wash to dry before beginning work on the surface. That is why the experts say that Ajanta paintings are not exactly fresco where the colour is applied when the lime coat is still wet. Mineral colours were used.

The drawings of figures and forms were outlined in red cinnabar. The artists used pigments from local sources—red and yellow ochres, green from mineral. White used beautifully to portray the intricate jewellery and create highlights came from lime and kaolin or what is known as china clay. Black was derived from lamp soot and blue was made from lapis lazuli which was imported. Perhaps, that is why the use of blue is relatively rare. Glue was used as a fixing agent to bind the pigments and animal hair-brushes were used.



THE MONKEY FAMILY OF MAMALLAPURAM

Munia tells me that I have been only talking of the development of art in north India. Did nothing happen in South India, she asks?

Of course, I say and show her a picture of the Monkey Family in Mamallapuram. The Indian artists have had a wonderful genius for capturing the characteristic quality of an animal—its pose, its bearing, its habits. They have achieved this with effortless beauty in the Monkey family.



Monkey family at Mamallapuram. An example of delightful naturalism.

Although, Mamallapuram has one of the greatest sculptural tableaux of Indian art, the grey granite Monkey Family sculpture is in the round and not executed in relief, that is not carved on the rock-face. It shows two seated adult monkeys, one picking lice out of the other's hair. And there is a baby monkey burying its face in the mother's lap. The delightful naturalness and the vivacity of the group, the artist's ability to make the stone come to life fills the visitor with a sense of awe.

There are other beautiful carvings of animals, a pair of ducks, a funny little tortoise, deer, a herd of elephants, lions and a whole menagerie of beasts. And they are all carved with a liveliness befitting a love for natural life.

There are amusing relief sculptures also. Like the cat who is standing in penance like the holy man in the relief. No doubt, the standing cat refers to the story of *Panchatantra* of a cat who would pretend to be meditating and not interested in his preys. So when the birds and little animals, mistaking his other-worldliness, would draw near he would quickly lunge and grab them for a meal.

If one looks carefully at temple carvings from this period onwards, one comes across many such wonderful fables to hold the attention of the pilgrims. In the 8th century Pattadakal temple in Karnataka, I recall a frieze narrating the story of the friendship between a crocodile and a monkey on a jamun tree.

Another feature to watch out for, I tell Munia, is the way scenes of daily life are transformed into art. It also gives us an idea of the strand of continuity in Indian culture. At Mamallapuram, on one of the great rock-reliefs there is a depiction of a milkman milking a cow. It is a marvel how 14 centuries later, today if you go to small towns or villages, you will see the milkman sitting on his haunches, tying the hind legs of the cow and holding his bucket the same way as in the sculpture. Once again the naturalism of the scene is awe-inspiring.

One of the most dramatic reliefs ever to be encountered in the history of Indian art is to be found at Mamallapuram. Some people call it Arjuna's penance, others call it Bhagiratha praying to Siva to bring Ganga down to this world.

In a scene teeming with activity, the central figures are of an ascetic doing *tapasya* (meditation) with both arms and one leg raised. To his left, slightly above him stands Siva granting a boon. A cleft between two rock-faces has been transformed into a river on which floats nagas(snakes), who are creatures of the water. One group shows a sage and his disciples worshipping before a Vishnu shrine. On the banks of the river, there are holy men doing their daily worship in the very same pose that you witness even today. Then there are a vast variety of animals already mentioned and a host of celestial beings flying around



Arjuna's penance, Mamallapuram. The vertically narrated story is one of the most dramatic relief sculptures in Indian art

watching a wondrous event. One cannot help wondering how much time it would have taken artists to carve such a complex tableau.

MAMALLAPURAM

Mamallapuram was founded by Narasimha, a Pallava king, in the 7th century. Situated some miles away from Chennai, its possibility as a port was realised by Narasimha. Narasimha enjoyed the title, Mamalla which means Great Warrior. During Narasimha's time Mamallapuram became an important port doing trade with South-East Asian countries. Tamil inscriptions have been found in Thailand.

It was Narasimha who initiated this poetry in stone, full of mystery and drama. Now Mamallapuram lies deserted, devoid of the pomp and splendour of yesteryears, waiting for tourists to come and admire some of the greatest creations in Indian art.

ASTASAHASRIKA-PRAJNAPARAMITA

Munia and I have embarked on a journey through five thousand years of Indian art. Our explorations are once again taking us to paintings, I tell her. We had earlier encountered the huge scale of murals in the cave monasteries. Now we will experience the opposite, the miniature scale. The Indian artist's genius allowed him to handle the monumental and the miniature with equal ease.

In eastern India, in the opposite direction from the cave monasteries, there flourished the Pala dynasty of Bengal from the eighth to the twelfth centuries. The Pala kings were Buddhists who patronised Mahaviharas or great monasteries throughout their kingdom at Nalanda, Odantapuri, Vikramsila and Somarupa.

The monasteries funded by kings and commoners were not only universities of Buddhist studies but were also libraries of Buddhist manuscripts. Copying and illustration of manuscripts were undertaken on a large scale and there were workshops for casting bronze images. The art was inspired by the Vajrayana school of Buddhism wherein the mantras or magical formulae of sounds were supposed to have summoned up the icons of a vast variety of deities.

One of the important Buddhist texts of the period is the *Astasahasrika-Prajnaparamita*. The word Prajnaparamita means the Perfection of Wisdom. There is a Buddhist deity of the same name who embodies this concept. Astasahasrika stands for a format of eight thousand lines. In The Asiatic Society Library of Kolkata, there is a beautiful specimen of Astasahasrika-Prajnaparamita, said to be nearly 1000 years old.

It was written on palmyra leaf as was customary at the time and created during the reign of Mahipala II. Some scholars suggest that it could have been executed in the reign of Mahipala I.

The painting of the deity Prajnaparamita is rendered with delicate beauty of lines and luminous colours. The figure barely two to three inches high is placed in the centre of the palm leaf with the text written on both sides. The fine

black lines defining the figure flow sinuously with a lilting rhythm in the spirit of both Gupta and Ajanta art. The colours glow with beautiful oranges and greens against the neutral palm leaf background. The expression of the deity is lit with a beatific smile. I point out to Munia to observe how the line was emerging as a distinctive feature of Indian painting highlighting the plastic or malleable characteristics of figures.

There are many such paintings in illuminated or painted manuscripts in famous museum and library collections all over the world. The paintings are of single figures of Buddhist gods and goddesses, or of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Sometimes there were attendant figures. One other style of painting existed in



A Bodhisattva from one illuminated manuscript of *Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita* commissioned by Rampala of Pala dynasty.

Pala art, different from the rhythmic, plastic treatment of the Kolkata manuscript. It was a flattish, two-dimensional, angular treatment of the figure.

The manuscripts were written on the dried leaves of the palmyra palm. This type of palm was best available in Bengal and the eastern coast of India and Sri Lanka. The smooth texture of the palm leaves provided a suitable surface for painting and writing. Outlines of the figures were drawn with lampblack or red. Colour was then applied. The colours commonly used were cinnabar red, indigo blue, yellow and green. White was used to create highlights.

The narrow leaves were bound together with cords running through them. They were then placed between narrow wooden covers which were richly painted with scenes from Buddhist mythology.

Long after Pala art declined in the twelfth century following the overthrow of the dynasty, the custom of painted wooden covers for Hindu manuscripts in Bengal continued and rich private and public collections of these painted covers exist throughout the world.

Although Pala art languished in Bengal and finally, vanished for lack of patronage, it continued to flourish in other states and other parts of the world. It is presumed that Buddhist missionaries from the Mahaviharas must have carried samples of the art to Nepal, Tibet, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. The characteristic curvy lines, the fine details, the flaming haloes have become a stylistic feature of Southeast Asian art. In India, the style survives in the Patachitra of Orissa, which is more of a folk art but retaining some of the refinements of classical art. Sadly, it is lost forever in Bengal.

More or less at the same time as Pala art flourished in Bengal and eastern India, another very strong school of art began to emerge in the western states of India. These manuscripts related to the Jain texts.

The three centres where the other school of miniature paintings blossomed in classical India were Gujarat, Rajasthan and Malwa. Although paper was known in western India through trade contacts, it was palm leaf that was used for manuscripts. Paper came to be used for illustration in the late 14th Century. However, palm leaf enjoyed continued use simultaneously.

The style of the Jain manuscripts became distinctive between the 13 and the 15th Centuries. The colours used were the same as those in Pala art except that the strong background colours of red or blue on which the figures were painted became a recognisable trait.

Compared to the delicacy of Pala art, the line in the Jain art of western India is used more energetically and with angularities. Draperies show a complex variety of patterns. Architecture and landscape appear as backgrounds. Regal



A scene from Kalpasutra, a Jain book of rituals.
Note the architectural patterns and textile details.

trappings are often seen. Being commissioned by rich Jain monks, lavish use of gold and ultramarine derived from imported gemstones are commonly encountered. Another unique feature that developed is the treatment of the eye. In figures painted in profile, the further eye extends beyond the contour of the face onto the ground.

The most common Jain manuscripts of the early period are Kalpasutra which is The Book of Rituals, and Kalakacharya Katha, an account of the exploits of the Jain monk Kalaka. While Jain illuminated pages of Jain manuscripts are found in many collections, one of the best is in the Lalbhai Museum in Ahmedabad.

BHANDARAS

The Jain merchants displayed a great reverence for the written word. Worship of books of wisdom, or Jnanapuja, is a regular ritual in Jain temples.

Thus it is not surprising that the rich and powerful traders and bankers as well as the great Jain kings of Chalukya dynasty, who ruled over Gujarat, parts of Rajasthan and Malwa, from the 10th to 13th Centuries, endowed big libraries called Bhandaras, where collections of texts were stored. They were generous in their grants to temples and religious establishments. Lesser men earned merit by commissioning copies of illuminated scriptures or dedicating bronze images.

The Bhandaras remain the property of the Jain community. They are found all over western India. Some of the important ones are found at Patan, the old capital, Cambay, a noted ancient port, and Jaisalmer. Even after Muslim invasion, the numbers of manuscripts increased because the Jain community still controlled banking and trade. And because these manuscripts were stored so carefully, future generations, people like you and me, are able to enjoy some wonderful art.



NATARAJA

It is time, I tell Munia, we turn once again to the south. It is in Tamil Nadu that bronze sculpture reached a peak of perfection. The time was the rule of the Chola kings from the tenth century onwards.

To make my point, I take Munia to the National Museum, Delhi to show her the bronze Nataraja of twelfth century. It is a magnificent statue, a little above three feet in height. The rhythm and energy of the work is truly awe-inspiring.

I inform Munia about the world-famous French sculptor Auguste Rodin's remark about Nataraja, the lord of dance. Rodin thought of the figure as the finest expression of rhythmic movement.

Though the Nataraja is depicted in different poses like Catura, it is the Anandatandava pose, or the dance of bliss, which is the most famous. With an immensely beautiful, chaste face, Shiva is represented in this pose as a four-armed god. The upper right hand holds the small drum called damaru to whose beat the whole cycle of creation and destruction pulsates. The lower right hand is held in abhaya mudra, a gesture promising freedom from fear and blessings.

The upper left arm is stretched across the torso and hangs limply on the right of the figure. The lower left arm is raised and often holds a flame. The bent right leg is crushing the demon of ignorance, while the bent left leg is raised and held across the body to the right. The precarious balance is handled with excellent poise. This is a common dance pose seen in south Indian classical forms.

The god's matted hair fans out on both sides of his head. A sash tied round his waist also streams out with the frenzied movement. A circle of stylised flames circumscribes his tremendous energy and vitality. The cosmic dancer embodies the rhythm of the universe.

Munia points out to me how the dancing figure is an important pose in



Nataraja. A Chola bronze in the Anandatandava or Dance of Bliss pose. French sculptor Rodin thought it to be the finest expression of rhythmic movement

south Indian art. She has seen dancing Ganeshas, Krishnas and Balagopalas. I congratulate her on her observation. The sacred dance has been a significant part of south Indian cultural environment and dance still holds a pre-eminent position in society. So it is not surprising that we see its reflection in sculpture, both stone and bronze. The difficulty of casting or carving the pose offers an added challenge to the artist.

Bronze sculpture reached superb artistic heights under the Cholas. The Chola kings were Saivites, followers of Shiva, and they were great patron of the arts. They built grand temples and commissioned bronze sculptures. According to experts, the school of bronze casters in the TAMILIAN kingdom was perhaps unrivalled in the excellence of its skills. The technique used was the lost wax process whereby the statue was first modelled with finesse to the last detail in hard beeswax. This was then coated with two layers of clay. The clay model

was then fired in a kiln so the molten wax drained out and a hard mould remained. The mould was then filled with molten bronze.

The artists created new ideals of male and female beauty according to strictly prescribed cannons or rules. The figures were slim with elegant, finely-sculpted features. They were heavily ornamented and stood or sat in very poetic, languid poses.

Besides images of gods and goddesses, statues of saint poets and kings and queens were also made. It is said that the bronze casters made some outstanding images of the Chola king Rajaraja.

After the images had been cast, the important citizens, including the royalty, offered gifts of brilliant jewellery to decorate the image. Art historian Vidya Dehejia mentions some 65 types of ornaments that were dedicated to the deities. This indicates not only the wealth of the community, but also a very sophisticated level of craftsmanship in precious metals and gemstones.

The bronze deities were used for different ceremonies. One particularly endearing one, I tell Munia, was the taking out of the image in a festive procession. Since the heavy stone icons could not be moved, the bronze deities were taken out for a change of air, so to speak. Religious processions have been an important ritual through the centuries.

Although stylised, the bronzes were particularly distinguished in the early Chola period ending in tenth century. Apart from single figures, there were couples depicting Shiva and Parvati or marriage groups of Shiva. Chola bronze-casting had a big influence on Sri Lankan metalwork.



Parvati, a Chola bronze.
A new ideal of feminine
beauty.

CHOLAS

Cholas were one of the three powerful dynasties that held sway over the Coromandel Coast, from the ninth century onwards for more than three hundred years. The two great kings of the dynasty were Rajaraja I(985-1014) and Rajendra I (1014-1042). While Rajaraja conquered Sri Lanka, Rajendra sent a naval expedition to Myanmar, Malaya and Sumatra.

The Chola kings were great temple builders leaving a distinct stamp on Indian architecture. All the arts also flourished under the patronage of Rajaraja I and Rajendra. The temple complexes were centres of dance and music. Temple dancers were called upon to perform before the deity. Literature received a special fillip as poets were honoured by court.

Art historian Susan Huntington says that the large array of metal sculpture during the Chola rule presupposes a great prosperity. The available metal could have been turned into coins, weapons, utensils and jewellery, all functional items. Instead, a spate of icons emerged from the workshops.

She also draws comparison with the abundance of bronze statuary in eastern India under Pala and Sena kings during the same period. Huntington speculates that perhaps new deposits of mineral were found at the time making it possible for the art to flourish.

According to Huntington, the alloy used for metal sculptures were pancaloha, or a blend of five metals. In contrast, in north India, an alloy of eight metals or Ashtadhatu was used.



BIRTH OF A PRINCE

Munia had been gifted a reproduction of the Birth Of A Prince. She was very curious to know about this style of painting. Its combination of delicacy and richness of detail captured her imagination.

This reproduction is one of the best examples of a Mughal miniature and was possibly painted by one of the most eminent painters of Emperor Jahangir's



Birth of a prince, a Mughal miniature, painted by Bishandas, one of the most eminent painters in Emperor Jahangir's court.

court, Bishndas. Bishndas, Jahangir wrote in his memoirs, was very good at achieving likeness.

Unlike a European painting where a single perspective, or a point of view prevails, here lots of things are happening. Within the harem walls the queen has given birth to a prince. She is being shown her baby. Outside, a very senior royal lady sits with her servants, guards, musicians and women of the harem. In a distant building, attendants are making some sort of preparations. The harem door, hidden by a curtain is festooned with flowers and leaves just like Indian homes on auspicious occasions. Outside the harem precincts, some men sit casting horoscopes. Other men bring trays of gifts. The painting is particularly arresting because of the intricate details of the carpets, textiles, decorations on walls and so on. The Mughal miniatures offer a fascinating blend of naturalism and stylisation. Real life mingles with certain established designs in painting.

The story of Mughal miniatures is closely linked with that of its patrons. The first seeds of the Mughal miniature school was planted by Emperor Humayun. In mid 1530, on his return from exile in the Safavid court, Humayun brought back with him two Persian artists from the court of Shah Tamasp. They were Mir Sayyid Ali and Abdus Samad.

So then are the Mughal miniatures Persian in inspiration and character, asks Munia. I show her some of the miniatures from Akbar's and Jahangir's times, like Akbar's court painter Baswan's *The Foppish Dervish Rebuked* or Jahangir's court painter Govardhan's *Hindu Holy Men*.

Munia ponders over the works as I point to her the warmer colourings in the Indian style of miniatures compared to the pale, ethereal colours of the Persian style. I also show her the Indian trees, plants, animals, birds and architecture which give the paintings a definite Indian character.

It was in Emperor Akbar's time that the atelier grew and many illuminated manuscripts were commissioned. Emperor Akbar, although illiterate, loved books, learning and spiritual pursuits. As a part of his well-planned imperial policy, he actively sought to integrate the local Indian population with the Mughal invaders who were of diverse Central Asian stock themselves. Thus, Indian artists who practiced illuminated manuscript painting in pre-Mughal times were hired. There was a lively tradition of illuminated manuscripts in Western India, Deccan Sultanates and Central Indian areas like Malwa. Akbar's atelier was also enriched by the influx of Europeans at his court who brought examples of their own art.

As a result of the enthusiastic royal patronage, the Mughal miniatures provided a vivid visual record of the times. The style of painting was full of



Akbar crossing the Ganga from Akbar-nama, painted by Ikhlas and Madhu.
A Mughal miniature showing heroic deeds.

atmosphere. Nature, man and architecture were placed in quiet harmony (although earlier paintings in Akbar's time show his heroic deeds with a lot of drama). The sensitivity and confidence with which the artist handled brush and paint had few parallels in world art.

The character of the paintings changed with each emperor. Akbar liked to commission illuminated manuscripts of literary classics. A major artistic project was the *Hamzanama* done in a larger format which recounts the adventures of Amir Hamza, the Prophet's uncle. Works on the Hindu epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were also commissioned. Paintings of Akbar's heroic deeds illustrated Abul Fazl's *Akbarnama* and important events of his reign were recorded.

Jahangir's atelier was engaged in a different kind of paintings. There was more quiet contemplation in his commissions. Jahangir was fascinated by curious natural phenomena. He had his artists paint exotic animals like the zebra or different kinds of flowers. There was an increase in portrait painting during his time. He commissioned wish-fulfilling, allegorical pictures where he is portrayed as the emperor of the universe. Jahangir had a touch of morbidity too. This is seen in the classic painting of all times—courtier Enayat Khan on his deathbed. Being mesmerised by the emaciated frame of the dying man, Jahangir ordered his artists to record the last moments.

During Emperor Shah Jahan's time the great ateliers of the earlier emperors' were reduced. Although Shah Jahan continued to commission paintings of important events of his reign, his real interest lay in buildings and urban planning. After a brief flowering of patronage by Dara Sikoh once again, Mughal miniatures went into a decline after the orthodox Emperor Aurungzeb gradually withdrew patronage.

With the decline of the Mughal empire, the artists of the imperial ateliers dispersed to other parts of the country. Consequently, regional schools flourished and held attention with their brilliance. However, there were regional schools too which resorted to pre-Mughal styles.

DECCANI PAINTINGS

Schools of paintings which flourished from the 16th century onwards in Ahmadnagar, Bijapur and Golconda Sultanates are not strictly speaking offshoots of Mughal miniature painting. The colours are much warmer. The treatment of the eyes, the costumes of the women, the foliage, the decorative elements have definite relationships with local traditions.

Some of the finest paintings of the Sulatanate schools were done in Bijapur. The portrait of Ibrahim II Adil Shah of Bijapur is a superb portraiture which clearly shows the difference with the Mughal style beginning with the dark background of the painting to the sense of movement and mood. The lotus at his feet, for example, are distinctly an Indian ornamentation.



Ibrahim II Adil Shah of Bijapur. A Deccani painting showing sensitive portraiture.

SCHOOLS OF RAJASTHAN

There were several Hindu Rajput kingdoms like Jodhpur, Bikaner, Kota, Bundi and Mewar who patronised art. Many were deeply influenced by the Mughals. Others like Mewar resisted Mughal power. It was during the rule of Jagat Singh of Mewar in 17th century that the painter Sahib Din flourished. His studio produced many brilliant works including the Ramayana and the Ragamala paintings. Mewar's history of conflict with the Mughals prompted Sahib Din

to adopt formats different from the Mughal miniatures. For Ramayana, he used a horizontal format borrowed from palm leaf manuscripts. The Ragmala paintings were, of course, done in the rectangular format. The colour palette is dominated by reds and ochres, reminiscent of Classical Indian paintings. The treatment of the eyes recall the pre-Mughal, secular text Caurapanchasika style of painting.



Lalitha Ragini from a Ragamala series painted by Sahibdin of Mewar School. Colours are much warmer and there are references to pre-Mughal traditions.

It is interesting that in Rajasthan, mural paintings once again received a new lease of life with palaces and havelis being painted in the 18th century. Till then it had been a rich, living tradition of Kerala and Southern temples.

The schools of Kota, Bundi and Bikaner adapted some conventions of Mughal miniatures. The themes were Ragamala paintings (illustrations of Hindusthani Classical ragas), Krishnaleela (episodes from Krishna's life), scenes from court life. The hunting scenes were famous from the Kota school.

PAHADI SCHOOLS

Schools of miniature painting sprang up in the hill states of Kangra, Guler and Basholi. The works of Kangra and Guler were lyrical in their composition, showing influences of Mughal styles although the themes were centred mostly on Krishnaleela.

The Basholi School attempted forceful iconic representations. The colour palette was not so dreamy as the Kangra and Guler, but steeped in strong colours like ochre and red.



A LITTLE GREEN BIRD

Munia by now has become aware of the connection between the shifts in visual language and changes in history. She asks, so what happened when the British came to India?

A good question. A major change occurred in Indian art, I tell her with the coming of the British. As a result of the gradual decline of the Mughals both at the centre and the provinces, as well as a decline in the regional kingdoms, the trained traditional artists began to look for new patrons. Officials of the British army and the East India Company filled the gap and employed these artists to assemble their own visual records.

The period was the latter half of the 18th century and the camera was still not available. The new rulers saw before them a picturesque country with exotic flora and fauna, costumes and ornaments. They wanted to document what they saw for the sake of scientific knowledge as well as for their own amusement.

The British patrons set up a dialogue between their own art and the traditional miniaturist's art. As a result an intriguing new style was born known variously as "Company School" or "Company Painting" after East India Company.

Th local artists, skilful in absorbing the important traits of other art forms, quickly learnt the lessons of British realism and the new medium of water-colour but combined them imaginatively with their own feelings for ideal forms, fine detailing and atmosphere. Realism in art demands that the model is painted exactly as the person or the object appears. The result was a charming hybrid style that tackled with ease studies of natural history, architecture and human figures.

The National Gallery Of Modern Art in Delhi has a fairly good collection of Company paintings. There is one of a little green bird, perhaps a coppersmith perched on a tree. It is perhaps one of the best examples of the mingling of realism and the sensitive detailing of the miniature style.



Green bird, a Company School painting.
(Courtesy: National Gallery of Modern Art)

Many of the patrons were well-known. There was Lady Impey, wife of Sir Elijah Impey, the first chief justice of the Supreme Court in Calcutta, who commissioned a portfolio of birds and plants. Lord Wellesley, who expanded British domination to the South by defeating Tipu Sultan, commissioned 27 folios of natural history paintings. Botanist William Roxburgh had commissioned meticulous copies of local flora which were collected and reproduced by the Botanical Survey of India and became well-known as the Roxburgh Icons.

British soldiers like William Fraser and Anglo-Indian Col. James Skinner commissioned portfolios of ethnic types as well as portfolios of various

professions. In Patna, whole sets of bazaar scenes were painted. The Indian gentry inspired by the British commissioned portraits and other genres.

Sometimes the copying from British models yielded quite funny results. There is one work at the NGMA which shows a portrait of the Prince and Princess of Wales. It is clear that the top half has been graphically painted from a bust photo of the royal couple but the artist did not quite know what to do with the lower half of the body. So he has made them sit cross-legged Indian fashion on a platform.

Many of these traditional artists were anonymous, but some names have survived. Shaikh Zayn-al-Din, an artist from Patna worked on the portfolios for Lady Impey. Ghulam Ali Khan, who had a workshop in Delhi painted for William Fraser and possibly, speculated Milfred Archer, an expert on British Indian art, for Col. James Skinner as well.

Much later in mid 19th century, Shaikh Mohammed Amir of Karaya in Calcutta was known as a talented artist depicting British households. Some of his paintings of horses were quite striking.

Where can we see these Company paintings, Munia asks. Given that the British were the largest patrons, most of the important portfolios are in the big public collections abroad. But the NGMA has a small but interesting collection of Company paintings.

But mid 19th century witnessed other interesting art practices as well. Many art historians think that this was the time that modernism in art began. Traditional artists moved away from the conventions which they learnt in their workshops and began experimenting with new mediums and new stylistic devices.

In Bengal and other parts of India like Tanjore and Mysore, new local patrons wanted paintings on religious themes executed in oil. Many traditional artists acquired the skills in oil-painting and created a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses to cater to the new demand triggered off by the encounter with the European oil-paintings.

Not much scholarly attention has been given to these paintings till recently. Some art historians think these early oils go back to the 18th century. In West Bengal, this genre of paintings became known as Dutch Bengal School or French Bengal School because many of them surfaced from Chinsura, a former Dutch colony and Chandernagore, a former French colony. Once, a whole bunch of them, some eight of them, were intercepted by Kolkata police in the early '80s while they were about to be smuggled out of the country. These were from Chinsura.

Subsequently though, scholars revised the term to Early Bengal Oils. The interesting character of these paintings is the traditional treatment of the icons. Nevertheless, a lot of the treatment and poses are taken from European oils like the Classical architectural backgrounds. Durga maybe riding a lion in the prescribed manner but behind her there is a very European building which is supposed to be her parents' house and further in the background there is Western



Infant Krishna with Nanda and Yashoda. Early Bengal Oil.

landscape. Or Durga maybe holding Ganesha on her lap but one can trace echoes of paintings of Mary with baby Jesus. The demand for such oils by unknown artists continued till the early 20th century.

In 19th century Kolkata, another art form that burgeoned spontaneously and received acclaim the world over was Kalighat Painting. As a centre for British trade and government, Kolkata was growing in the mid 19th century. With the spread of metropolis, the importance of Kalighat as a pilgrimage centre multiplied. This in turn tempted patuas, village folk-artists, to come and settle in Kalighat.

But whether it was because of a more sophisticated urban audience or the need to paint faster because of a growing market, the style changed from the innocence of folk vision to a sharper, more fluid style full of wit and sparkle.

The works were done with ink and brush with a light colour wash. The figures had a suggestion of volume which prompted art historian W. G. Archer to suggest that the Kalighat artists were influenced By European art. This in turn, gave rise to a fierce debate where Indian art historians forcefully refuted Archer's claim. Jyotindra Jain showed how the artists were influenced by the traditional pottery and folk-toys.

Besides gods and goddesses, the artists painted subjects related to everyday life like a cat chomping on a lobster, but it is also a take-off on the hypocritical religious men who pretend to be vegetarians but secretly eat meat and fish. There are portraits of professions like barbers and of rich babus. Satirical paintings on the outcome of women's eman-



A barber tending to a Babu.
A sparkling Kalighat painting.

cipation reflected the mood of male-oriented society. There are a whole cast of characters.

Stylistically, apart from the elegant manner of painting, the artists retained some of the traditional devices like painting a beautiful woman with a flower. But they also used European props to suit the new European influenced environment like chairs and other pieces of furniture. Jain has also shown how the artists' vision had been inspired by the frame and curtains of the proscenium stage introduced by the Europeans. The theatre had become a major preoccupation of the babus of Bengal and the artists were catering to a new class of patrons.

The art form died down by the early decades of the 20th century. Its market shrank with the advent of printmaking studios and photography. But for all the debate surrounding the genre of painting, it is acknowledged to be the first modern, urban art form. It influenced several contemporary artists of Bengal with its sophistication and elegance.



HAMSA DAMAYANTI AND BHARATMATA

Do you know, I ask Munia, that in spite of having great works of art to show to the world, ancient and medieval India never accorded any great status to its artists? They never held any significant position in the social and caste hierarchy. The Mughal emperors would award them generously and sometimes admit them at court. But they would never be a part of the nobility.

Do you know when this situation changed? Munia shook her head. I told her it was the second half of the nineteenth century when Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) appeared on the scene. The name immediately clicked a spark of recognition in Munia. She recalled seeing a picture, Hamsa Damayanti in her grandmother's family home.

It showed a woman standing pensively on marble steps leading to a lotus pool. In front of her perches a swan that acts as a messenger between her and her suitor King Nala. Damayanti's royal lineage is visible in her fine sari worn Marathi or south Indian style and her rich jewellery. I tell Munia that these mythological paintings are Raja Ravi Varma's speciality. His other strength was portrait painting.

Raja Ravi Varma was born in an aristocratic family of Kerala in 1848. His family was related by marriage to the royal family of Travancore. The most acclaimed artist of his time, the painter was more or less self-taught. In his family, art practice was a way of life. His uncle Raja Raja Varma painted on ivory. His brother C Raja Raja Varma and his sister Mangalabai Tampuratti were also acknowledged painters.

Although Ravi Varma had no formal training, he grew up in an art-making environment. A clever man, he must have realised the potential of oil painting and the British realistic style of painting. Unlike the medium of tempera of earlier times where the pigment was bound with a fixative like some resinous glue, in oil painting the pigment was mixed with oil. It gave the painting a rich saturation of colour, texture and stability.



Lady in Moonlight. Oil by Raja Ravi Varma (Courtesy: National Gallery of Modern Art).

Ravi Varma had the opportunity of observing the European artist Theodore Jensen visiting Travancore court. Subsequently, painter Frank Brooks came to teach his younger brother. Once again Ravi Varma had the opportunity to study the technique.

Despite these exposures, there is no denying that Ravi Varma was an artist of genius. He first made his reputation by painting oil portraits of royal families, rich businessmen and big landowners. Using the European technique of creating exact likeness of features, skin tones, textiles and ornaments, he nevertheless succeeded in stamping a distinct Indian identity.

It was the first appearance of Indian 'high art', that is art different from what was made by anonymous traditional artists. They tended to create and follow stereotypes for faster production. The latter

practice did often devalue the quality of the image.

Having made a success of portrait commissions, Ravi Varma turned towards religious and mythological paintings. It had seemed to him that this genre of painting had become devalued through endless mediocre repetitions by indifferent craftspersons.

He set about breaking the age-old typical scenes by introducing new elements. He gave the images a contemporary reality by adding architectural props and landscape features in the European style. At the same time, he kept the memories of an older tradition alive. Say, for instance, in *Hamsa Damayanti*, the woman with a bird would recall fleetingly a *nayika*, or the customary representation of a beautiful woman in our visual tradition.

Whether it is the more intimate paintings like the *Birth of Sakuntala* or the large paintings with many people like *The Court of Virata*, the dramatic gesture is a very important part of his compositions. And this is not surprising. We are told that when he was living in Mumbai, both he and his brother would visit the theatre quite often.

Ravi Varma's religious paintings were highly popular. In 1894, he set up the Ravi Varma Fine Art Lithographic Press with German artists Fritz Schleicher and B Gerhardt. This made Ravi Varma's work available throughout the country and accessible to all classes of people. Raja Ravi Varma influenced the visual culture of the country enormously. The greatest impact was felt in the Hindi mythological films.

ABANINDRANATH TAGORE (1871-1951)

Even as Raja Ravi Varma was nearing the end of his life, an artistic genius was rising in the east. Do you know his name, I ask? Promptly Munia answers Abanindranath Tagore.

It is not surprising that Munia knows Abanindranath's name. His painting Bharat Mata done in 1905 was a symbol of nationalist aspiration and has been widely reproduced. When the British ordered partition of Bengal in 1905, there was a upsurge of nationalist sentiment in the province. Abanindranath's uncle, the poet and writer Rabindranath Tagore, along with many others, gave leadership to the nationalist protest.

Abanindranath embodied the high political feelings of the time in the form of Bharat Mata. A secular figure of a woman was painted like a Hindu deity. However, instead of the divine attributes, she carried in her four hands the emblems of the common man's dreams—sheaves of corn representing freedom from hunger, a piece of cloth representing clothes for all, a manuscript for knowledge and rudraksha beads for spiritual experience. She has a halo behind her head and lotuses bloom at her feet.

The style of the painting is different



Bharatmata by
Abanindranath Tagore.

from what we have encountered so far. It is done in watercolour and the treatment is lyrical. It is quite different from British academic realism introduced by government art schools and so popular at the time. At the same time, though it has some vague family resemblance to the Indian miniature tradition, it is quite different in its effect of misty delicacy.

Abanindranath belonged to the aristocratic family of Tagores of Jorasanko. The family had been in the forefront of the cultural movement in Bengal with experiments in literature, music, dance, theatre and art. From his boyhood, Abanindranath showed reluctance for formal academic studies. But he devoted himself to painting lessons by European artists along with his brothers Samarendranath and Gaganendranath. Both Abanindranath and Gaganendranath actively experimented with art language. Gaganendranath adopted European Cubism. Sister Sunayani Devi, however, had to be content with teaching herself even though she was keen to study art. She did not receive lessons.

It was while he was studying with Charles Palmer towards the close of the nineteenth century that he stopped his lessons. He became aware of his dissatisfaction with European conventions of realism and naturalism. Around 1895, he received a gift of a portfolio of Indian miniature paintings. This provided a motivation for experimenting with a traditional type of figuration and background. To this new search for language was added other impetuses.

One was the rising nationalist movement which was looking at art as a vehicle for spreading the ideas of Swaraj. To this was added another thrust from the Japanese philosopher Kakuzo Okakura. He came to Kolkata in the early twentieth century to disseminate his philosophy of Pan-Asianism. Okakura was instrumental in bringing two Japanese artists Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunso.

These two artists had profound influence on the art practices of the time. They introduced Abanindranath to the wash technique which the whimsical genius made into his own. The technique allowed the artist to paint in watercolours, then dip the painted image in water and repaint the wet surface. This resulted in the characteristic blurred, misty effect of the painting which heightened the atmosphere that the painting sought to convey.

One of the persons who supported Abanindranath and brought him into teaching was E.B. Havell, principal of Government art school. He started a department for Indian-style painting at the art school under Abanindranath. After Havell left, Abanindranath resigned from the school but continued to teach privately.

Eventually, Abanindranath evolved his own poetic style of painting full of fantasy and whimsy. He painted literary, historic and mythological themes. Among his early famous works, there is the memorable 'The Last Moments of Shah Jahan'. Among his later works, the Arabian Nights series is wonderful. Painting images of poet Rabindranath Tagore was a favourite subject. He also painted some landscapes. In his later years, he made small, whimsical sculptures with found objects like barks and twigs of trees and called them Katum Kutum. There is a small collection of these sculptures at the Santiniketan Museum. The bulk of Abanindranath's paintings are with the Rabindra Bharati Society in Kolkata. A small collection of them can be seen at the National Gallery of Modern Art.

Abanindranath's fame as painter will perhaps be rivalled by his reputation as a writer of children's stories in Bengali. The wit and imagination of stories such as *Kshirer Putul* (Doll made of Khoya) or *Raj Kahini* (Tale of Kings) are still cherished by readers of Bengali. He is even more respected among artists and intellectuals for his essays on aesthetics, that is theories and philosophy of art and its appreciation. These were delivered as Bageshwari Lectures at Calcutta University.

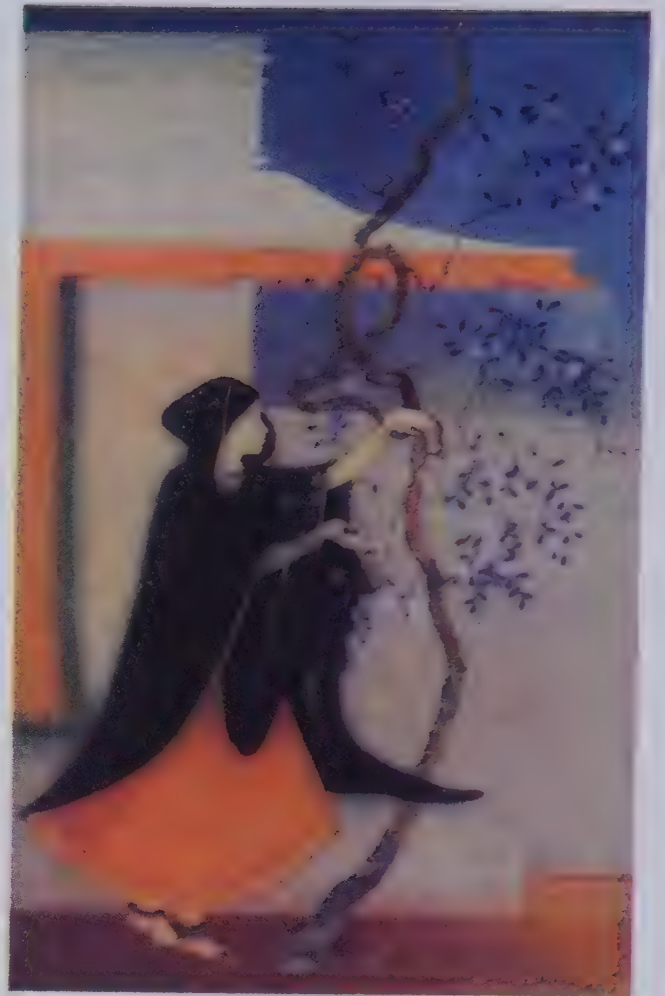
GOVERNMENT ART SCHOOLS AND ACADEMIC REALISTS

In 1854 art schools were set up by the East India Company at Kolkata (then Calcutta), Mumbai (then Bombay), and Chennai (then Madras). Initially, the idea was to give training to artisans and craftpersons. But later the syllabus was changed to equip artists to handle academic realism and naturalism. The result was that the schools were flooded with students from an educated, higher class of society.

Along with the art teaching institutions, new platforms like exhibitions began to be patronised. A number of gifted artists emerged from these art schools. They were Pestonjee Bomanji, M.F. Pithawalla, M.V. Dhurandhar, sculptor G.K. Mhatre, Abalal Rahiman, A.X. Trinidade among the many who emerged from the Mumbai school in those early years. From Kolkata came J.P. Gangooly, and later Hemen Mazumdar and Atul Bose among many others. Hemen Mazumdar created a special genre of paintings of women draped in wet saris. These artists adopted European techniques but created an Indian reality.



Head of a Punjabi woman by Pestonjee Bomanjee. (Courtesy: National Gallery of Modern Art)



Woman plucking flowers. By Kshitindranath Majumdar. (Courtesy: National Gallery of Modern Art)

BENGAL SCHOOL

Abanindranath's style of painting, with its mix of Indian tradition, along with Japanese as well as European art nouveau influence found many followers. Among his students, the most well-known were Nandalal Bose, Surendranath Kar, Asit Haldar, Kshitindranath Mazumdar, K. Venkatappa and many others. The group because of their distinct style, different from European naturalism, came to be called Bengal School.

Abanindranath's disciples dispersed throughout India carrying with them the seeds of his art style. Over the years, it became a movement. Asit Haldar joined the Lucknow School of Art. Samarendranath Gupta joined the Mayo School of Art, Lahore. Sailendranath Dey joined the Jaipur School of Arts. Promode Kumar Chatterjee was sent by Abanindranath to teach at Andhra Jatiya Kalashala at Masulipatnam. Venkatappa went to Mysore.

HARIPURA POSTERS AND THE SANTINIKETAN MOVEMENT

Becoming deeply engrossed in the story of Indian art, Munia asks about Nandalal Bose (1882-1966) and the Haripura Posters. She has seen a reproduction in a book she has and wants to know why they are so famous?

Haripura Posters they are really painted wall insets brought Nandalal's art experiments at Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan to the public eye. In 1938, Mahatma Gandhi invited Nandalal to decorate the Congress pavilion at the Haripura session. Earlier the Mahatma had requested him to set up an art exhibition at the Lucknow session in 1936 and decorate the township at the Faizpur Congress in 1937. What Nandalal had done not only pleased the Mahatma but held enormous appeal for the ordinary people visiting the pavilion.

The Haripura posters symbolised all that was held dear in the Santiniketan philosophy. There were 400 painted wall insets of which Nandalal was supposed to have done 100 and his students copied the rest. Made out of ordinary, easily accessible material like paper stretched on inexpensive board, the paintings forged links with common people both in terms of subject and treatment.

The paintings portrayed people in their daily pursuits as well as animals and birds. They were done with great zest in an animated, free-flowing style. The works had the lively rhythm and the robustness of the Bengal pats and were yet very modern in style in their absence of too much ornate detailing, their smooth brushwork in the calligraphic style. Calligraphy implies writing with the brush so the fluid line of brush movement is called a calligraphic style. The paintings showed a cobbler, a tailor, a carpenter, a mother bathing her child, a drummer, a pair of shahnaiwallas and so on. The colours in these works were balanced beautifully.

Ever since Nandalal joined Kala Bhavan in Santiniketan in 1920, in response to an invitation by Rabindranath Tagore, the young artist bubbled with ideas.



Tailor, a panel from the Haripura Posters by Nandalal Bose.

Rabindranath founded Visva Bharati in early twentieth century with the aim of imparting a holistic, nonformal mode of education. Rabindranath had rebelled against formal schooling in his boyhood. So in the heart of rural Bengal, amid a vast expanse of nature, he created a simple, ashram-like environment. The poet was inspired by the Upanishadic ideals of man and nature as an integrated whole. Rabindranath wanted to encourage creativity and he gave art an important role in his educational system. He would invite best minds from India and abroad to spend time at Santiniketan so that his students and teachers had stimulating exposure.

Rabindranath felt that Nandalal was the right vehicle to carry out his ideas of art education. Nandalal was a disciple of Abanindranath. In 1909, he was in a team of artists led by Lady Herringham to copy the Ajanta murals. This had a

lasting impact on his visual language. Before he went to Santiniketan, Nandalal used to paint gods and mythological scenes like everyone else in the Bengal School.

The expansive landscape of Santiniketan, the simple lifestyle of tribals and villagers, the Bauls, a religious sect of itinerant musicians, gave Nandalal's vision another dimension. He freed himself from the stereotypical themes and began to paint from life. In all these departures from an existing pattern, Nandalal was inspired by Rabindranath.

Nandalal was also successful in giving shape to his ideas because of his two brilliant students who later joined his team of teachers. They were Benodebehari Mukherjee and Ramkinkar Baij. While Benodebehari's passion for nature was celebrated in his paintings, Ramkinkar emerged as a major sculptor in contemporary India.

Nandalal sought to open the eyes of his students to the pulsating life-force of nature. Both the filmmaker Satyajit Ray and printmaker Krishna Reddy, now living in New York used to acknowledge Nandalal's role in their artistic growth.

The students were taken out regularly for outdoor sketching. Nandalal also introduced a sense of wholeness to art education at Santiniketan. Students



Picnic by Ramkinkar Baij. Painting of outdoor scenes became a tradition in Santiniketan.

were not only taught to draw and paint, sculpt and make plates for printing, but they were encouraged to design sets and costumes for theatre, design books and engage in several other craft pursuits. The aim was to break down the artificial barriers raised by British art schools between artists and artisans. Besides Rabindranath was keen to inculcate a new aesthetic experience as an alternative to the British dominance over tastes. Nandalal gave effective shape to these ideas.

One of the most daring experiments carried out by Nandalal with the help of Benodebehari and Ramkinkar was the re-introduction of the mural tradition. Why do you call it a daring experiment, asks Munia?

Well, by the twentieth century the great tradition of mural painting had all but died out. And yet, Nandalal had been deeply inspired by the murals he had seen in his youth. To his interest was added the suggestion of the famous urban designer, Patrick Geddes, who visited Santiniketan in 1922 and advised murals as decoration.

Nandalal knew little about the techniques or material. Nevertheless, he set about trying his hand. What was most striking was that neither he, nor his disciples blindly copied tradition. They absorbed the language of tradition and transformed it to adorn buildings different from the ancient cave temples and palaces.

In 1927-28, Nandalal invited Narsingh Lal, a traditional mural artist from Jaipur, to teach the Santiniketan artists the technique of mural painting. This coupled with the spirit of experiment bursting forth in Santiniketan at the time produced some marvellous murals. The thrust continued till very recently when artists such as Somnath Hore and Professor K G Subramanyan created wonderful dramatic murals.



A mural painted on Patha Bhavan walls in Santiniketan. Nandalal Bose painted this along with his students. It shows scenes of Ashram life.

“Munia,” I say, “if you go to Santiniketan, you must make sure that you must see as many murals as you can.” But of the ones that are a must-see, there is Benodebehari’s Medieval Saints at Hindi Bhavan.



A detail of Medieval Saints painted by Benodebehari Mukherjee and his team on the Hindi Bhavan walls.

This work has been designed in the spirit of the great narrative friezes of sculpture at Sanci and other stupas. The action flows like a river. The scenes involving the mystic saints like Kabir intermingle with scenes of everyday life like the woman churning butter. The mural offers so many surprises that one never tires of seeing it. Sadly the marvellous mural is uncared for and not properly lit.

Instead of always following the horizontal unfolding of narrative, Benodebehari used space in a very inventive manner like the mural where he created the effect of a canopy. This is a ceiling mural at Kala Bhavan hostel where he depicted nature in all its exuberance.

Benodebehari suffered from severe visual impairment in his later years. The final mural that he did on the walls of Kala Bhavan was a wonderful play of figures. Here he made figures in full size from folded paper and he laid them out as he wanted them. His assistants recast them in ceramic tiles and finally, they were assembled on the walls of Kala Bhavan.



Fisherman, a paper collage by Benodabehari Mukherjee when he was almost blind.

One must also see the murals at Cheena Bhavan. The ground floor murals were done by Nandalal with reliefs by Ramkinkar, Sankho Chaudhuri, Provas Sen and Rabi Chatterjee. On the first floor, there is a mural on campus life by Benodebehari.

Nandalal also did a beautiful mural with bright colours and simple forms based on campus life on the Patha Bhavana wall. Art historian R Siva Kumar suggests that these mural experiments were precursors to the flowering of the Haripura posters.

But perhaps one of the most dramatic projects was the one undertaken by Ramkinkar, Nandalal and others, for the decoration of Kalo Badi or Black House in 1936. Ramkinkar's reliefs on the external walls were the most outstanding works of art in the whole project. The relief figures on the mud walls of the house were coated in black asphalt. These life-size reliefs preceded the large public sculptures done by Ram Kinkar on the Kala Bhavan campus.

One can go on listing endlessly these team exercises. It is important to note what they achieved. These are wonderful examples of public art or environmental art perhaps unique in the history of Indian art.

They were done not for money but executed as a labour of love. The idea was to create beauty in which the community can share. The ideal is best expressed by Siva Kumar. Writing about Nandalal's Patha Bhavan mural on ashram life, he observes, "These little cameos are combined to form a larger image of the local life and environment, where nature and man, simple villagers and learned men, craftsmen and artists, blend into an active community." In today's world it would seem an idyll but the early Santiniketan community ran on those lines.

It was a dream which had its echoes later. In the Sixties when artists Sankho Chaudhuri and Prof K G Subramanyan joined the fine arts department of M S University at Baroda, they sought to replicate many of the institutions and attitudes that they experienced as students in Santiniketan.

WOMAN'S HEAD, THREE GIRLS AND A HORSE

Even as Santiniketan artists were enriching visual language in new ways, three artists with totally different idioms emerged in the Twenties and Thirties. Their works were individualistic and expressive of their personal vision. They changed the character of the image radically.

To understand them, I tell Munia, we need to visit the National Gallery of Modern Art. The three artists were Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941) and Jamini Roy (1887-1974).

I show Munia the woman's head painted in shades of brown. It is Rabindranath's painting. The calm face of the beautiful woman looks out at the viewer with a hint of sadness and even enigma. It is difficult to guess her



A woman's head by Rabindranath Tagore: a melancholy imagination.

thoughts. The lines circling her face and the shadow behind her flow smoothly with a quiet rhythm. The smudged ink on the borders of her garment creates splotched shadows.

Naturally Munia asks, "Who is she?" No one in particular, I say. These women surface from the dark recesses of Rabindranath's imagination and communicate to the viewer a feeling of haunting melancholy. A sense of brooding sorrow is also noticed in Rabindranath's landscapes. As if the beauty of the moment should be seen against the inevitability of its passing.

Besides the women and landscapes, Rabindranath painted a menagerie of bizarre, whimsical animals. They are funny, fantastic even macabre. The rhythmic curving lines give an idea of how Rabindranath started painting. Do tell the story, Munia says. One knows of him as a poet, storyteller, writer of songs and plays, educationist, but a painter?

The creative upsurge, I say, came to him like a sudden shower on a hot summer's day. Rabindranath, like all the members of the Tagore family, did a little sketching and drawing as a young boy. Later, he was driven by a desire to sketch and paint from time to time. But nothing much came out of these efforts.

It was while travelling to Argentina in 1924 that he started doodling on the manuscript of *Purabi*, a collection of poems. The scratch marks obliterating unwanted words and lines were joined together and thickened to form fantastic patterns.

What started playfully on his Argentinian trip became a driving force. Observers who watched him at work said that he drew or painted like a driven man. Pen, pencil, brush, a bit of rag or cotton wool, whatever he could lay his hands on became his material. And he wielded them relentlessly. The image rose from his innermost being spontaneously. They created a profound impact on the viewer.

From 1928, he began to paint seriously. He would say that the rhythmic lines would express all that could not be put into words. His first exhibition was held outside the country in Paris, in 1930. Then the show travelled to other European countries. It was shown in Kolkata for the first time after its return from Europe. One of the best collections of Rabindranath's paintings is in the National Gallery of Modern Art. The other substantial body of his work can be found at Rabindra Bhavan in Santiniketan.

AMRITA SHER-GIL

In contrast to the spontaneous energy in Rabindranath's work, the *Three Girls* is a beautiful painted tableau. Compared to the furiously energetic brushwork

of her European style painting, Amrita Sher-Gil, when dealing with Indian subjects, saturated the figures with strong reds, oranges, browns, whites with a quiet brush.

Amrita Sher-Gil, the first professional woman artist of India, was born in Budapest. Her father was a Sikh from a rich, land-owning family, and her mother a Hungarian. The early years of Amrita's life were spent in comings and goings between India and Europe.

She received her art training in Paris. Her early works included a number of self-portraits in the expressionist style. This style involves a distortion of form, energetic brushwork revealing the way paint has been applied in thick,



Three Girls by Amrita Shergil: wonderful colours and form.

textured strokes and an application of strong, sometimes discordant colours. The style of painting often expresses an inner turbulence of emotions.

In 1934, Sher-Gil returned to India. Here she had the opportunity to meet villagers and ordinary people. She had once written that she had set out to “interpret India and, principally, the life of the Indian poor ...” The dark soulful eyes haunted her, just as the vibrant colours of the textiles fascinated. To this was added her exposure to the miniature tradition. As a result of the new stimuli, her paintings underwent a major change.

The figures were posed in groups. There was a brooding, inward-looking quality about their faces. The pigments, reds and browns, were intensely used. Sher-Gil visited Ajanta and Ellora and south India in 1936. This journey caused another profound shift in her work. The figures became more elongated. The sad, haunting look persisted. But the greater use of browns and whites gave the paintings a more austere look.

When Sher-Gil briefly visited Europe again in the late Thirties, she painted once more in the European style. It was, I tell Munia, almost as if she had two identities. However, the impact of her Indian experience, showed in the quietness of the paintings of this period in Europe.

Sher-Gil returned once again to India when the Second World War broke out. Some of her major paintings like *The Swing* and *Woman at Bath* were done in 1940. She died in 1941 even before the full potential of her talents could be realised.

JAMINI ROY

Compared to the note of melancholy experienced in the works of Rabindranath and Sher-Gil, Jamini Roy’s assimilation of the folk idiom in, say, *The Horse* introduced a bright presence in Indian art. Jamini received his art education at the Government Art School, Kolkata.

In the early years, Jamini painted in the European style. There was a time when he even adapted an impressionistic style with thick short brushstrokes to capture the quality of light. At the time, he painted the river in Kolkata, the lanes of the city, houses and landscapes. Through these early years, he seemed to be in a restless search for a language that suited his artistic needs. There was a time when he also worked in the style of Bengal School watercolours.

From the mid-Twenties, he became increasingly attracted to the folk arts. Belonging to an upper class, landed family hailing from Beliatare village in the Bankura district of West Bengal, Jamini started collecting pats or folk paintings

of Bankura and adjoining districts. The tribal women also began to appear in his canvases from this time.

Clearly his interests were shifting from the city to the countryside. He began experimenting with folk forms. Later he rejected the whole notion of European art practice, and began working with traditional materials like vegetable and earth colours. He also dispensed with an individual studio and established a workshop-like environment. He would draw the main forms and specify the colours and even complete a whole painting. Others would fill in the detail or replicate the original.



Horse by Jamini Roy: bold experiments with folk tradition.

Initially, Jamini experimented with the calligraphic lines made with the sweep of the brush in the style of the Kalighat paintings. Munia remembers a painting of leaping deer made by Jamini that she had seen. It was a quiet melange of pale grey and black. He painted mother and child figures, Christ-like faces.

But finally colours attracted him. So did the strong, earthy forms of folk paintings. He invented his decorative language and created images of animals, mother and child figures, women going for worship, holy men, rich men travelling in palanquins and a variety of themes. He also painted Ramayana stories. Apart from the strong colours, forms and pleasing decorative motifs, there was also an element of wit in many of his paintings.

The simplification of forms and colours made it easy for Jamini's works to be copied. But his workshop approach also made it possible for middle-class families to acquire his paintings. This led to their wide presence in Bengali homes.



BRIDGING OVER DECADES

For Munia, who is a little familiar with 20th century art scene because of books, exhibitions, picture reproductions, this last phase of our journey is like a bridge over the decades. Many ideas and talents blossomed in the 20th century creating a splendid garden of Indian art expressions.

There have been two major trends, I tell Munia. One was the strong urge to absorb international values in art. The other opposing pull was to re-establish links with one's tradition. This tug-of-war raised debates on the level of ideas. But there have always been artists who merged the two opposing poles with great felicity.

SCULPTURE

In 1938, Ramkinkar created a large public sculpture called Santhal Family. Made of cement mixed with gravel, it shows a monumentally built family group complete with a dog moving with all their belongings to another place. Art experts consider this piece a landmark in the history of modern Indian art, I inform Munia.

Here Ramkinkar bridges tradition and modernity. While he retains the modern touch in the movement and texture, in the spirit of the robust figuration, he harks back to the noble beauty of the classical sculptures.

In experimenting with various styles, Ramkinkar swung between figurative and abstract pieces. He was an eclectic genius who picked the style that would suit his mood and visualisation at that time. Although he was a committed nationalist, he did not let that influence the choice of his sculptural vocabulary.

In Delhi, he created a pair of monumental sculptures of a yaksha and yakshi guarding the massive gates of the Reserve Bank Of India. The inspiration is clearly traditional. In contrast, the bust of Rabindranath that he made to be installed at the shores of Lake Balaton, Hungary has a very contemporary feel about it. Ramkinkar had left behind a strong inspirational legacy.



Santhal Family by Ramkinkar Baij in Santiniketan. An experiment in public sculpture that is a landmark in contemporary art.

Students of Santiniketan made lively experiments with form and material. While Sankho Chaudhuri adopted semi-abstract forms inspired by the western tradition, others forged new paths. In the Seventies, Prof. K.G. Subramanyan made terracotta relief sculptures of great artistic excellence. Somewhat later, A. Ramachandran created totemic bronze sculptures inspired by the carved, wooden temple pillars of Kerala.

Meera Mukherjee broke completely new ground in the early Sixties with her bronze sculptures inspired by the folk-art of dhokra, lost wax tradition, of Bastar. She depicted labourers and ordinary people—weavers, coolies laying cables, people travelling on a crowded bus, a woman with a winnow. She also depicted musicians. Two of her monumental works related to the spirit of peace. One was a seated Buddha installed at a tea garden near Darjeeling and the other of Asoka, installed on the grounds of a Delhi hotel.

Modern abstract sculptures in metal were made by Pilloo Pochkhanawalla, Adi Davierwalla in Mumbai and Amarnath Sehgal in Delhi. Post-Partition



Boatman by Meera Mukherjee. Breaking new ground.

Bhabesh Sanyal made some good portrait sculptures. In Kolkata, Chintamani Kar worked in the figurative style learnt in Europe.

Pradosh Dasgupta created voluminous, semi-abstract forms. His student Sarbari Roychowdhury created portraits of musicians also in a voluminous style. Nandagopal in Chennai created ornate semi-abstract bronze sculptures. In Delhi, Mrinalini Mukherjee made complex rope sculptures.

Perhaps the most daring of experiments in sculpture was made by printmaker Somnath Hore. He made small figures in bronze with flattened planes of enormous power and he kept the inner grid in full view.



Dog by Somnath Hore. Daring experiments.

The art schools at Baroda, Benaras Hindu University, Kolkata and Santiniketan had exceptionally strong sculpture departments training a number of gifted sculptors. The innovative use of material and forms was exciting.

PRINTMAKING

From the beginnings in the 19th century, when lithographic studies were set up in Mumbai, Kolkata, Pune and elsewhere, graphic arts in India received a great thrust. Initially, mythological and religious pictures were very popular. Printing presses also issued woodcut pictures.

In Kolkata, Bat-tala prints imitating the Kalighat style thrived even as it catered to the flourishing Bengali publishing industry. Many of the pictures were sought after by collectors.

It was at Kala Bhavan in Santiniketan that a new thinking was brought to printmaking. It was felt that attractive images produced in large numbers would do a great deal for the cause of education. So a printmaking studio was set up at Kala Bhavan and teachers came from Europe. Nandalal Bose and his colleagues threw themselves into learning the process.



Woman Cooking, linocut by Nandalal Bose.

Instead of using expensive metal plates for engraving, Nandalal innovated with inexpensive material as substitutes for zinc plates. A popular material was thick linoleum and linocut became a much-used process.

When Rabindranath wrote a primer for teaching Bengali to children, Nandalal did simple, attractive illustrations with linocut to go with the text. The Sahaj Path illustrations of a woman cooking, boats on the river, and so on are imprinted on the memory of all Bengalis.

Meanwhile, a strong graphic arts department was being built in Government Art School in Kolkata in the Forties. The department received nurturing from the Principal, Mukul Dey.

Several important graphic artists emerged from the Kolkata art school. Of them, Somnath Hore was particularly noteworthy. Hore experimented with all the processes of platemaking using metal, wood and litho stones. He created some powerful images of famine-stricken people of Kolkata. These skeletal images were etched in his mind since the Great Famine of 1943. The figures surfaced in all his works including sculpture. Hore is also significant because he started a nucleus of printmaking in Delhi when he came to teach at Delhi Polytechnic. Since then Delhi produced many printmakers including the reputed Anupam Sud.

Other noteworthy experiments in printmaking were made by Sanat Kar and Lalu Prasad Shaw. They were students of Government Art School at Kolkata but went onto teach at Santiniketan. At the M. S. University at Baroda, the printmaking department was also a busy centre undertaking lively experiments.

PAINTING

From the Forties, painting in India took a new turn. The change was accelerated in the post-Independence years. There were conflicting pulls between international modernism and our traditional roots. Similarly, there was a struggle between the expression of social context and abstractionism.

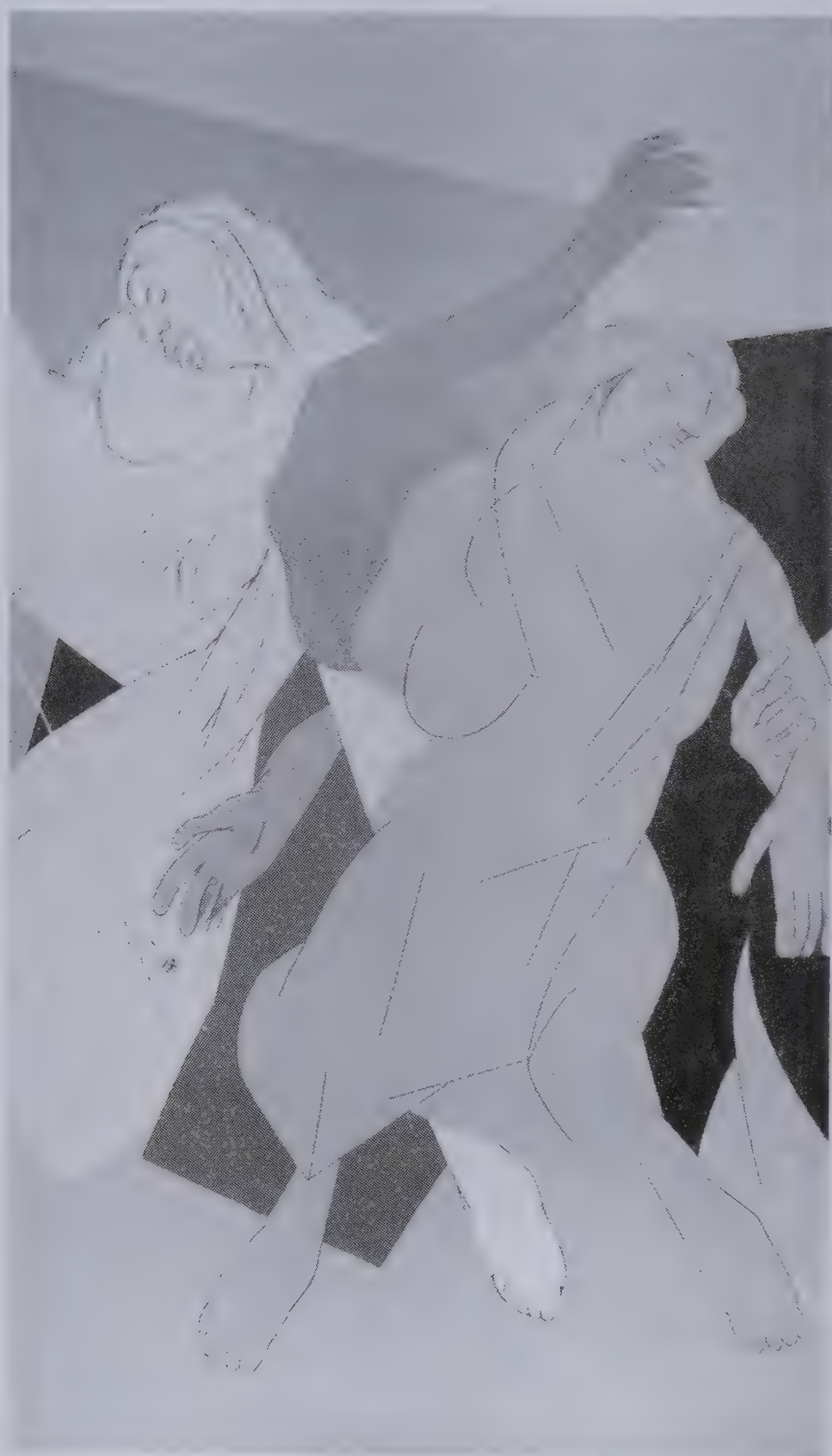
Kolkata saw the formation of an important group of young artists in 1943. They were among others sculptor Pradosh Dasgupta, painters Nirode Mazumdar, Pratosh Sen and Gopal Ghosh and designer Subho Tagore. These artists got together after witnessing the disasters of the 1943 famine. They wanted to evolve an art language which will depict the contemporary situation. They were known as the Calcutta Group. A similar group wanting to explore new language was formed in Mumbai in 1947. Known as the Progressive Artists Group, the members included M.F. Husain, F. N. Souza, S. H. Raza, K. H. Ara and others. Artists close to the group and later to emerge as significant names were Tyeb Mehta and Akbar Padamsee. The Delhi Shilpi Chakra was also formed following Independence. These groups wanted to assimilate the language of international modern art. The first two groups did not survive very long and were dissolved by the early Fifties. But their impact remained for long.

Modern artists began to adopt the international idiom. This brought a reaction in the Sixties led by J. Swaminathan in Delhi who criticised the dominating influence of internationalism. Delhi Polytechnic became an important art teaching institution with artists like Sailoz Mukherjee teaching there. In the Sixties, in Kolkata artists like Ganesh Pyne, Jogen Chowdhury and Bikash Bhattacharjee sought to bridge the divide between their roots and the modern values in art. The Society of Contemporary Artists played an important role in Kolkata. In Chennai, an artists' village was created in Cholamandalam. And neo-Tantric art, an Indian version of abstract art, became a trend.

Meanwhile, the appointment of Prof. K.G. Sumbramanyan in the Fine Arts department of Baroda gave a new direction to experimentation in painting. Narrative painting became identified with the Baroda school. Subramanyan made bold experiments with medium and language.

In the Seventies, many women artists emerged. They were seen questioning the established order and their role in it. Names of Nalini Malani, Arpita Singh, Nilima Sheikh and Veena Bhargava come easily to mind.

By the Eighties, works became more experimental in terms of materials and themes. The conflict between internationalism and indigenism began to disappear. The younger generations of artists were more concerned with stretching the horizons of expression.



A detail part of Triptych on Charak festival by Tyeb Mehta. It was inspired by his stay at Santiniketan and made a record at an international auction.

Even as there is frenzied art activity with countless exhibitions, artists' camps, workshops, sales and auctions, conceptual art or art celebrating an idea is gaining in importance. So artists are using fragile or temporary material to create works that can be dismantled after the show. They are called installations and sometimes they are using new media like video, digital cameras and so on to record the images. At the same time Indian art is gaining greater recognition at international auctions. Munia says that she noticed a Tyeb Mehta painting fetching a very high price at an international auction. Yes, I say, this has been a growing trend. Even museums in the USA are holding shows of contemporary Indian art. With its worth being appreciated as much as ancient or medieval Indian art, I tell Munia, there is a great deal to look forward to in contemporary Indian art.





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